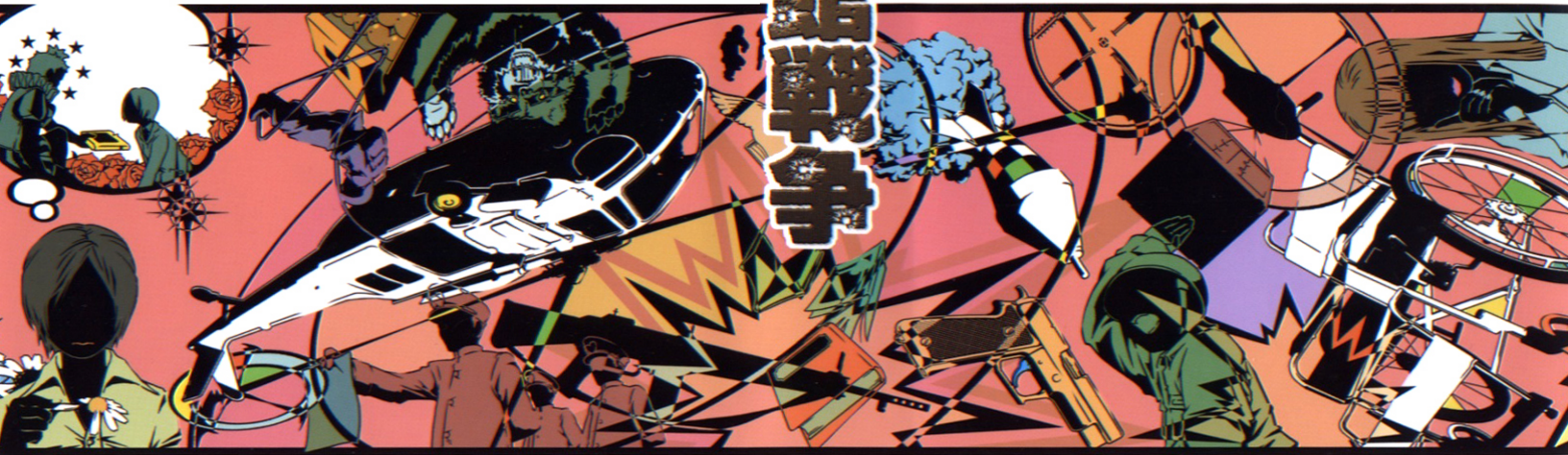


# 圖書館戰爭



有川浩

# LIBRARY WAR

Arikawa Hiro

Illustration

Adabana Sukumo

English Translation

Melithiel



ASCII MEDIA WORKS

## **Declaration of Library Freedom**

- 1. Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.**
- 2. Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.**
- 3. Libraries protect the privacy of their users.**
- 4. Libraries oppose all censorship.**

**When the freedom of the library is violated, we librarians will unite and fight to the end to protect its freedom.**

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# Chapter 1

Libraries have the right to  
gather materials freely.

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Chapter 1: Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.

★

*Dear Mother and Father,*

*How are you? I'm doing fine. I'd heard the air in Tokyo isn't very good, but it seems to be a little better around Musashino. I've gotten used to dorm life too.*

*My dearest wish was granted—I was accepted by the library—so these days...*

*I work hard every day in basic combat training.*

★

“ARMS UP, KASAHARA!”

Hearing the scornful voice yelling her name, Kasahara Iku desperately drew up her arms, gripping her rifle.

The rifle was a Howa Type 64, military surplus from the Japanese army, and weighed 4.4 kg, a formidable weight for a twenty-two-year-old girl to carry while running. It was an old model, not used much anymore by even the Japanese army; a gun that was only kept around for training new recruits. Ammunition wasn't even made for it anymore. The base had adopted the lighter, easier to handle Howa Type 89 as well, but as only the more skilled members used it, the new members were only trained on handguns and submachine guns.

Hot on the heels of the group of men ahead of her, Iku finished the high port drill, a sprint with a rifle. The minute she passed the finish line, she collapsed, tumbling down to the ground. Twelfth place out of fifty, pretty good even compared to the men, and the undisputed winner among the women, but—

“Did I say you could fall down?! Drop and give me ten!!”

Outwardly obedient, Iku quickly finished her penalty pushups—while in her mind she cursed him. *Bastard demon instructor! Someday I'll show you!* The other female members, observing this exchange, crossed the finish line without collapsing, waiting until they were behind the line of seated men to rest.

When Iku finished her pushups and joined the line, the other girls shrugged and looked apologetic. *Unfair*, they thought, *but unavoidable*.

When everyone had finished the high port drill, it was time for lunch break. The noon bell sounded over the track.

“Man, I am soooo beat!”



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It was early spring, and the mess hall rang with the shrieks and complaints of the new members. At night, they would be tired from training, and not have the energy to make much noise.

In the evening the mess hall would also be occupied by librarians who had finished their duties at the library and returned to the base, but during the daytime it was mostly reserved for the base defense members, logistical support, and now, in early spring, the new recruits.

“That bastard instructor! He completely hates me!” said Iku, thrusting her fork violently into the lunch special, chicken sauté.

“‘Bastard instructor’... you mean Instructor Doujou?”

“Of course!”

Doujou Atsushi, Library Officer Second Class. The “demon instructor” who had just ordered Iku to do pushups.

Kantou Library Base, located in Musashi-sakai, was a training facility on the scale of a small garrison. The base was responsible for the training of all the new recruits in the Kantou area, and had three hundred recruits this year. Since combat training was required even for those who were assigned as librarians, the recruits had been broken up into six groups of fifty, all experiencing the same brutal training. It was hard enough that every year scores of trainees dropped out.

“It’s only *me!* I’m the only one who gets punished like that! He’s never treated the other girls like that, even when they’re worn out! How can he possibly complain when I finished twelfth in the high port drill, counting the men!? You’d think with a result like that he could overlook me falling down, but noooo! I only fell over after I crossed the finish line, didn’t I?”

“Perhaps it means that he has high expectations of you?” offered Shibasaki Asako, Iku’s roommate. After training was over, she would be working as a librarian at Musashino First Library, the library attached to the Kantou Library Base.

Iku would of course be assigned to the defense force of the Musashino First Library. Since the Kantou Library Base contained dorms for all single library workers stationed in the Kantou region, even those who worked at another library in the Tokyo area lived on the base. The other prefectures all had bases attached to their main libraries, with corresponding facilities.

“Anyway, I quite like him. He’s got that certain something, doesn’t he?”

Several girls nearby agreed with Shibasaki. “Oh, yes, there’s something about his face...” But there were an equal number of dissenters—“But he’s so scary!” “I don’t think he’s much to look at.” Iku, naturally, was at the extreme end of this spectrum.

“Shibasaki, you need to get your eyes checked! What’s so great about that midget?”



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“Yeah, yeah! I hate to say it, but he is pretty short, isn’t he!”

The other girls all agreed, but Shibasaki wouldn’t budge.

“He’s taller than I am, at least.”

Shibasaki, at 157 cm, was the kind of woman who would make a small girlfriend for a normal man. In comparison, Iku was 170 cm—not short even for a man. The girls didn’t know Doujou’s exact height, but they estimated it at around 165 cm.

“But Kasahara, if you’re picky about height it’ll just get harder and harder to find a man. No matter how fit we Japanese have gotten, there still aren’t many men who measure up to a 170 cm girl!”

“Don’t tell me it’ll get harder and harder! Excuse me for being a giant, okay?” Iku’s height complex flared up. “Even if I weren’t picky, that guy at least is out of the question! He has a terrible personality.”

“Is that what you all think of me? I see.”

Iku turned at the sound of a deep voice from behind, and yelped. Doujou, the man she had just been ripping to pieces, was standing behind her holding a tray.

“What are you doing here!? ...sir?”

The instructors usually ate in the officer’s mess next door.

“The lunch special over here sounded better,” Doujou answered, taking a seat at the table behind Iku and the others.

He added, “You don’t have to call me ‘sir’ if it’s too much trouble for you. You seem much more comfortable with the tone you were using earlier. We’re not as strict about rules as other armies—lucky for you.”

*What nerve! This is exactly why I hate him!* Iku stuck out her tongue where Doujou couldn’t see. The other girls giggled, but it was no laughing matter for her.

“‘A midget bastard instructor with a terrible personality,’ was it? Hmm, I’m only human, so I can’t guarantee that any insults to my character that I happen to overhear won’t affect my teaching.”

Shibasaki immediately abandoned Iku to save her own skin. “I was complimenting you, so I’m off the hook, right, Instructor?” *Dammit, what happened to female solidarity!?* Iku began to greedily consume her food.

“It’s not good for you to eat so fast, Kasahara-san,” said a voice from above her. It belonged to another instructor, Komaki Mikihisa, Library Officer Second Class. He was probably the same age as Doujou, but he was 10 cm taller and had a gentle manner that made him more popular with the female recruits. The girls who had shuddered when Doujou appeared were now animated and lovestruck. *Serves you right*, Iku thought, secretly triumphant for no good reason, overlooking the fact that she had no part in this victory.

“For some reason my lunch doesn’t taste good anymore,” she announced, loudly enough



for Doujou to hear. She looked dubiously up at Komaki. “It’s not right for the instructors to use the recruits’ mess hall.”

This was the first time she had ever personally exchanged words with Komaki. So—*why does he know my name?*

There were only ten-odd instructors, even counting the lecturers, so all the new members knew their names and faces, but for the instructors there were three hundred new names and faces. Iku remembered Komaki and Doujou from the interview portion of the enlistment exams, but they had interviewed many times the number of people they had accepted, so it was unlikely that he remembered her from that.

“Oh, please don’t say that. They feed us like Buddhist monks in the officer mess. Since it’s mostly old guys who eat there,” Komaki added, sitting down across from Doujou. The moment to ask why he knew her name had passed.

Peeking at Shibasaki next to her, Iku saw that she had put down her chopsticks already—she had a small appetite. “Let’s go, Shibasaki.” Without waiting for an answer, Iku stood up. As she walked out carrying her tray—

“Hey, you dropped this,” Doujou called, holding out something to Iku. It was a postcard that had been folded in half. Apparently it had fallen out of her pocket when she stood up.

“That’s all right, just throw it away,” she said dismissively, eager to get away from Doujou.

“Are you sure? It looks like you’ve already written it.”

*Crap, maybe it would have been faster just to take it, she thought. But it’s too late now.*

“It’s folded up because I knew I couldn’t send it. If my parents read that postcard they’d make me come back home. If you’ll excuse me.” Iku firmly put an end to the conversation and joined the line of people waiting to return their tableware.

“Who makes someone else throw away their mail? God, that girl...” Doujou turned the postcard over. “Idiot! She already wrote the address!” The address was somewhere in Ibaraki Prefecture. Probably her parents’ house.

Annoyed, Doujou tried to tear up the postcard. Komaki gave him a bitter smile.

“This is the kind of letter that would make her parents demand that she come home?” Apparently Komaki had read the postcard while Doujou was looking at the back. Like many in his line of work, he was a fast reader.

*“My dearest wish was granted—I was accepted by the library—so these days, I work hard every day in basic combat training.”*

“Maybe they’re opposed to her joining the defense force.”

“But hasn’t it been her first choice all along?”

An overwhelming majority of applicants to the library wanted to be traditional librarians.



Normally members of the Defense Force were chosen from this pool, based on aptitude and the candidate's own wishes. For a woman to designate the Defense Force as her first choice was quite unusual. Nowadays it was a more dangerous place to work than the army or the police force, at least on a day-to-day basis.

"I know what her first choice was. I interviewed her too, you know." Hearing that a woman wanted to be in the Defense Force, the six instructors in charge of interviews had taken special pains to recruit her.

"But she really seems to hate you, Doujou. Maybe it's time to rethink your training policies?"

"If all the pressure I'm putting on her is too much, she can quit. Even her parents are opposed to it."

"That's your plan? Very sneaky."

Doujou didn't respond to Komaki's bantering tone; he was silently shredding the postcard.

"So how good is she, really?"

"She's a monster." There was no point in beating around the bush. "She came in twelfth in the high port drill, counting the men. She'd probably be fine even if you shoved her into real army drills."

She was blessed with a fine physique, but more importantly she had amazing physical ability. In drills that cultivated the fast reflexes and instantaneous power so important in the combat arts, she was beginning to outperform even the instructors. She was quite the jock. According to her file, she had done track from middle school through college.

"She's amazing, even if we assume that sports gave her a good foundation. Tons of potential," said Komaki, whistling. Doujou raised an eyebrow and told him to mind his manners at mealtime, then resumed his lunch, having finished ripping up the postcard.

"But you've already decided, right?"

"Not yet," Doujou countered obstinately. "It's not something that's decided by physical ability alone, after all."

★

In the last year of the Shouwa period, a law known as the Media Improvement Act was passed. It proposed to crack down on forms of expression that violated human rights and disturbed public order and morality. Having overcome the opposition, who claimed that censorship was unconstitutional, the law was written vaguely and left much room for interpretation. Indeed, it seemed to almost purposely leave the basis for censorship to the whims of the enforcers. The by-laws and enforcement regulations dealing with censorship could be supplemented as occasion demanded; that discretionary power was entrusted to





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an executive committee with an astonishing amount of latitude.

The political dealing that had enabled such an extreme law to be passed was called one of the Seven Wonders of the Shouwa political world; it was never disclosed just how the law had come to be. The law was forced onto an unwitting citizenry, helped by the outbreak of political apathy in society. As the ramifications of the law became clear, there was a violent public outcry. But the law, once passed, could not be so easily overturned.

Under those conditions, people prayed for an authority to stand up against the censorship of the Media Improvement Act. Their prayers were answered in the form of the “Law of Library Freedom,” as it was popularly called—a new section appended to the third section of the existing library laws.

Library Laws, Section Four: The Freedom of the Library

Article 30. Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.

Article 31. Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

Article 32. Libraries protect the privacy of their users.

Article 33. Libraries oppose all censorship.

Article 34. When the freedom of the library is violated, we librarians will unite and fight to the end to protect its freedom.

These articles were originally section titles in the Japan Library Association’s longer “Declaration of Library Freedom,” but in order to push the law through quickly, and to provide the widest possible range of interpretation to fight against the Media Improvement Act’s limitless discretionary power, the rest of the document was dropped and only the titles were kept. Similar to the Media Improvement Act, the details of execution could be supplemented at any time. It was an attempt to counterbalance the Media Improvement Act, fighting arbitrary power with arbitrary power, so to speak.

It was impossible to pass a law that would completely counterbalance the Media Improvement Act, which had the right to inspect all media. Hence, the opposition adopted the strategy of strengthening existing administrative laws—to which the Improvement Act’s backing party paid little attention—in order to combat censorship in one area.

Thirty years had passed since both laws went into effect—it was now Year 31 of the Seika era.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The official Japanese calendar is based on era names, which change when a new emperor ascends the throne. The current era is Heisei, which began in 1989 after the end of the Shouwa era, making 2009 Heisei 21. In the alternate world of Toshokan Sensou, the Shouwa era was followed by the Seika era. The book takes place in Seika 31, or 2019 in the Western calendar.



## Chapter 1: Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.

The Media Improvement Committee established by the Media Improvement Act took up residence in the Ministry of Justice. Proxy organizations known as Improvement Special Agencies were instituted in each prefecture. They watched over all media, and had the power to restrict any publication, film, or musical composition that was deemed a threat to public order and morality.

Specifically, they had the right to examine all goods received by retail stores. They had the right to stop publishers from distributing works. They had the right to ban certain things from broadcast in the media, or order them revised. They had the right to order internet service providers to block sites. Since the television stations, publishers, and stores had no power to oppose this censorship, they had no choice but to submit to it.

The media, which should have resisted the Media Improvement Act before it was passed, excreted trivial analyses of governmental announcements, and focused entirely on impotent criticism of the government. It was equivalent to surrendering to the Media Improvement Act without complaint.

Unique in their resistance, the tabloids, the vulgar enemy of justice, launched a campaign of violent opposition, but they had been playing cat and mouse with censorship and confiscation long before the Media Improvement Act was passed.

There were no penalties for the creators of censored works, nor was it a crime to buy published media. The Media Improvement Act paid lip service to “the fundamental human right of freedom of expression” by insisting that media was not regulated before distribution. In actuality, media that did not meet with the Media Improvement Act’s standards for order and decency were hunted down the minute they were released to the public, and depending on the situation, the publisher, agent, and main distributor might have to share the penalties and monetary losses incurred if their material was censored. As a defensive measure, they began to self-regulate, and the result for creators was the same as if their works had been censored outright.

Meanwhile, the libraries, unique in their legal ability to oppose the Media Improvement Committee, had also undergone drastic changes in the last thirty years.

Since the public libraries had the right to resist censorship, gather all kinds of media freely, and provide them to the community, they became the Media Improvement Committee’s only really troubling “enemy.” As the Improvement Special Agencies escalated their heavy-handed displays of censorship, gaining momentum like a boulder rolling downhill, the public libraries responded by increasing their defenses, until eventually every main branch in the country had guards. As a result, the dispute between the libraries and the Improvement Special Agencies intensified. The history of the conflict was a story of armament and counter-armament. Firearms were introduced at a rather early stage. However, every



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escalation of the conflict was instigated by the Improvement Committee, as the libraries had a basic policy of nonaggressive defense.

The Media Improvement Committee and the libraries both stretched their respective laws until their conflict had become extralegal. The law could not intervene unless the dispute threatened public or private property or the lives of civilians.

One could even stretch the laws to allow casualties among Improvement Committee and library troops.

Against that cultural backdrop, eventually the libraries had established bases in ten different regions of Japan, where Library Defense Force members were trained. The operation of the libraries also became more centralized. Personnel affairs, once the province of the local branches, were taken over by regional administrative agencies. The finances were also processed centrally, in order to streamline the management of income and expenditures and to reduce the operating budget.

All libraries except for the National Diet Library were under local governmental administration. According to a report published in 1963, “Report on Management of Public Libraries in Medium and Small Cities” (also known as the Chusho Report)<sup>2</sup>, public libraries existed to provide services for local residents, and thus had no centralized organizational hierarchy. Therefore, they did not belong in the national budget. That fact made the financial side of library management a perpetual worry, but the independent nature of the local administrative organizations was the very thing that made it possible to confront the Ministry of Justice’s Media Improvement Committee. Indeed, the confrontation between the Media Improvement Committee and the public libraries could be called a facet of the antagonism between the state and local governments, fueled by the trend of independence in local administrations, and the persistent rumor that the forty-seven prefectures would be forced to merge into larger states. Looking back thirty years later, the proponents of the Law of the Library Freedom could be properly called schemers, for casting the Media Improvement Act’s suppressive activities as an affront to regional independence.

★

“At any rate, she herself wants to be in the defense force, so if we’re going to take on a woman it has to be her. She’s a college graduate, she fulfills all the qualifications to be a librarian. And we’ve been told for a long time that we need a female point of view in the group.”

“I doubt she could provide *that* for us,” Doujou spat cynically.

Komaki smiled sadly at him. “When you put it that way, you make it sound like you

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2 See section 3: <http://archive.ifla.org/IV/ifla62/62-kawy.htm>



even want to keep her out of the Defense Force, Doujou.”

Doujou had no response for this gentle criticism. He knew that he lacked impartiality where Kasahara Iku was concerned.

“Even if you could keep her out of the Defense Force, there aren’t any openings left among the librarians. It’d be pretty hard to get her transferred to another base, since we all keep separate accounting systems. Maybe she could join the logistical support division? There’s no precedent for that, though.”

The logistical support for the library troops, including supply, maintenance, and equipment distribution, was outsourced to a large company, in an attempt to reduce the operational budget. Thus, except for the upper management, the logistical support division was normally staffed by temporary contract workers and part-timers.

“A real library worker in an office full of temporary ones would feel out of place, I think. Well, perhaps if we said we were trying to create a career path for managerial candidates, or something...”

“Forget it.”

Doujou sipped his miso soup, not bothering to hide his ill humor. Having his ignoble wishes discussed in excruciating detail only showed him how unfair he was being. In Aesop’s story, it was the Sun, not the North Wind, who got the traveler to remove his cloak. There was nothing more gloomy than being shined on by a nitpicking sun; still, Komaki was right.

“We assign candidates according to their aptitude. That policy hasn’t changed. Kasahara Iku’s aptitude lies in the direction of the Defense Force.” At Doujou’s stubborn tone, Komaki again smiled sadly.

“I’m sorry, I should have given you more credit.”

Occasionally, Doujou didn’t take well to his friend’s well-meaning but brutal honesty.



After lunch, they had unarmed combat training in the indoor dojo. Today’s lesson was on judo. Since the trainees were only in their first month, the plan was freestyle sparring.

“Kasahara, I don’t think any of us can take you!” the girls apologized. All of them were a few sizes smaller than Iku; if you had paired up an average man with an average woman, there would have been the same level of difference in breadth, height, and physique. And since it was Iku, who had been a top performer in all the drills, it was obvious that the sparring would end with Iku completely defeating the her female partner.

“Then how about me? Pick me, pick me!” The boys nearby grasped the situation instantly, and scrambled to volunteer. The way they didn’t bother to hide their dirty-



minded enthusiasm at the thought of wrestling with a woman was surprisingly refreshing, but—

“What the hell kind of idiots are you!?” Doujou indiscriminately laid into the swarm of men raising their hands.

“Kasahara, pair up with me. I’m not letting any of these guys near you.”

A large chorus of “No fair, Instructor!” went up, which Doujou silenced with a look.

“It’s not like that. I just don’t think of her as a woman. How desperate do you think I am?”

The remark made Iku’s hackles rise. *Ooh, he makes me mad! It’s not like I want him to think of me as a woman, but he could have said it some other way, bastard!*

“Are you quite sure, Instructor?” she said with ruthless politeness. As Doujou turned to look at her, she took careful aim and launched her attack. “You appear to be rather shorter than I. Will you even be able to reach my collar, sir?”

She was trying her utmost to provoke him, but his expression didn’t waver in the slightest.

“Begin!” Doujou instructed, and came at her.

*Whoa! He’s like stone!*

Iku had only sparred with girls before, and she recoiled in surprise at the solidness of Doujou’s body. She could tell instantly that the quality of his muscle was fundamentally different.

She realized she was going to lose the panicked second before the world turned upside-down. She was flipped flat on her back, the wind knocked out of her. Doujou’s face appeared overhead.

Adjusting his *gi*, Doujou said only, “Tough talk for someone who hasn’t even learned to fall correctly.”

It appeared the provocation had been a complete success. Iku ground her teeth at the childishness of his physical retaliation, ignoring her own hypocrisy.

“You appear to be rather taller than I, so you should be able to make me eat tatami at least once, right?”

*...is he—trying to pick a fight—he is—he is! —well, he’s got one!*

A cry of wonder went up from the onlookers. Practice halted entirely at the incredible spectacle before them.

With a very loud *thump*, Doujou tumbled to the floor.

This was because Iku had jumped to her feet, gotten a running start, and drop kicked him squarely in the back.

“How’s the tatami, sir?”

Doujou, propping himself up by his arms on the mat, glanced at Iku, who had struck



a taunting pose. “So that’s how it’s going to be, is it?” he murmured. Before the words were even out of his mouth, he cut her legs out from under her, taking her completely by surprise. This time it was Iku who was tossed on her backside.

Then, “OWWWWWWWW!” A terrible scream rose from her throat.

*What is this? I feel like my arm is about to come off!* All she knew was that somehow her right hand was being pulled back as far as it would go; she had no idea what shape she had been twisted into. The boys around her whispered in dumbfounded amazement, “Wow, it’s the armbreaker!”—*the strongest joint lock in judo! That famous one! I can’t believe he’s childish enough to use it against a girl!*

“I’m impressed that you wanted a no-holds-barred match with me. You’ve got guts, I respect that. That’s why I didn’t hold back—hey, you over there, start a thirty-second count.”

The men nearby took up this task and started a countdown, pounding on the tatami. *What the hell are you going so slow for—!*

“There’s no way I can last for thirty seconds, dumbasses! Wipe those smiles off your faces and stop counting! Uncle! *Uncle!* Let go of me, you piece of shit! *Doujou, I’m going to kill you!!*”

By the time he released her from the armlock, Iku had run through every dirty word she knew.

“Jeez! I can’t *believe* him!” Kasahara cried, with an energy that had only returned after practice was over and they had returned to the dorm.

“You’re the one I can’t believe, Kasahara,” Shibasaki put in as she returned from the bath, still flabbergasted. “What normal person would drop kick an instructor from behind? The things you do are absurd. Even insanity has its limits.”

“He started it!”

Iku grimaced as she flexed her right arm, which was covered in medicated patches. Thinking she might have pulled a muscle, Doujou had ordered her to the infirmary, and she had spent the rest of practice being treated. Since her injury was his doing, Iku couldn’t help but see his actions as hypocritical false solicitude.

“It made me like Instructor Doujou even more, I think.”

“What? You turncoat! You know what terrible things he’s done to me!”

“Turncoat? Where on earth did that come from? You know, Kasahara, I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while, but you’ve got a terrible sense for words. As your friend, I thought you should know.”

“Leave me alone,” Iku said sulkily. Her roommate of one month was dreadfully blunt.

Shibasaki continued, determined to say her piece, unconcerned by Iku’s perverse mood. “You know, I think he was going easy on you.”





“What? How could you think that!”

“The boys were saying that no one could withstand a proper armbreaker for more than three seconds. You lasted ten.”

“Only because he wanted to prolong my suffering.” Iku was as dubious of Doujou as Shibasaki was supportive.

“Even after being attacked by an uncouth hick, he was merciful to the end. Such maturity and kindness! I’ve fallen even more in love with him!”

“Wait, by ‘uncouth hick,’ do you mean me?”

“Are you trying to deny it?”

As much as it pained her, she couldn’t deny it. Growing up in the country had given her good physical abilities, but it also meant that that “hick” wasn’t too far off the mark. Iku sank into a sullen silence.

Anyway. “No one’s ever accused me of being a delicate beauty like you.”

“Jealous? Let me tell you, being a ‘delicate beauty’ has its downsides too,” Shibasaki said dismissively, deftly winning the conversational battle. “On another note, what are you going to say to your parents? You still haven’t told them you’re being assigned to the Defense Force, have you.”

“You’re not done yet? Give me a break here!”

Iku collapsed over the *kotatsu*<sup>3</sup> and buried her head in her arms. She had written that postcard to break the news to her parents, but in the end, she had just thrown it away—or more accurately, forced Doujou to do it for her.

She hadn’t told her rustic parents that she had been hired as a member of the Defense Force. They still thought she had been recruited to be a librarian. Even then, their response had been an unencouraging *But the library is so dangerous nowadays!*

“Umm, I’m taking it slow there.”

“What are you going to do when they want to come see where you work? You know, I wouldn’t have expected you to have such overprotective parents,” Shibasaki murmured, pulling a random bag from their shared stash of snacks. Dinner wasn’t enough to support them through this period of intensely exhausting training, so they had developed a “midnight snacking” habit.

“It’s not my fault,” Iku pouted, reaching for the open bag of snacks. “I have three older brothers. My parents expect a lot of unreasonable things from me, as a girl. I think they wanted to raise me on butterflies and flowers.”

But having three rowdy older brothers around the same age had ensured that she

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3 Wikipedia: “A *kotatsu*, used almost exclusively in Japan, is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits. Underneath is a heat source, often built into the table itself.”



developed a little differently. “The weak are abused, or they leave”; trained by that tacit yet absolute rule of children, Iku had become, in Shibasaki’s words, an uncouth hick. Her parents’ grief had been a thing to behold.

She had only gotten into college because of her track-and-field record, so Iku had hoped that they would start recognizing her as her own person, but her parents had so far shown no sign that they had given up faith in her femininity.

If they were to learn that she was entering the Defense Force—“I bet they’ll faint,” Shibasaki predicted heartlessly.

“It’d be nice if that’s all they did.” It was likely that she’d be dragged back home and reemployed at one of her parents’ connections, a pitiable fate. Country parents were scary like that.

“Librarians and Defense Force members don’t have many overlapping duties—too bad.” The first priority of the Defense Force was the security and surveillance of the library. Since members were in continuous training for those skills, they didn’t have time for office duties. “You might be able to ask them to let you do desk work when your parents come... but that won’t work if they come visit without telling you first.”

“Don’t even joke about that, I’m begging you! I have enough problems as it is!”

Iku didn’t have the energy to worry, worked to exhaustion every day in drills as she was. The question of her parents was the biggest issue she was ignoring.

“I hear that the Library Task Force has duties in the library. They have to be familiar with every procedure, so that they can cope with all possible contingencies. Though that’s neither here nor there; they wouldn’t take a newcomer,” Shibasaki amended, preempting the same comment by Iku.

The Task Force was mostly composed of elites chosen from the Defense Force. They were stationed on base during peacetime, but dispatched to any library in times of need. Their duties spanned a wide range, from normal library activities to full-scale battle.

“But Kasahara, you meet the qualifications for a professional librarian, right? Why wasn’t that your first choice?”

Requirements for librarians and assistant librarians were set forth in the Library Laws<sup>4</sup>, but the library staff was less regulated and needed fewer qualifications. Indeed, back when local librarians had control over personnel affairs, there were many library staff members who didn’t meet the requirements to be proper librarians. However, after local branches of the Library Corps were organized, authority over personnel matters was given to them, and today, there was a movement throughout the whole country to recognize library staff members as professionals themselves.

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4 See Article 5: <http://www.jla.or.jp/law-e.html>



Chapter 1: Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.

“Oh, various reasons...” Iku began to answer, then widened her eyes and frowned at Shibasaki. “Wait, how did you know what my first choice was?” Iku didn’t think she had ever talked to her about it.

Shibasaki smiled with good grace, saying, “There are plenty of tricks for developing one’s information network”—she was always on her guard.

“By the way, I’ve heard that you’re the first woman ever at the Kantou Base to designate the Defense Force as her first choice, and one of the first in the whole country.”

“What? Really!?”

She hadn’t had any idea. *If that’s the case...* The events at lunchtime passed through her head. “*It’s not good for you to eat so fast, Kasahara-san.*” She understood why Komaki had known who she was. *If I’m the first ever, it makes sense that I would stick in his memory, or that he might even check up on me.*

“So, why did you decide on the Defense Force, even though it’s plain to see that your parents are opposed to it? I guess I understand if you wanted to put your combat skills to good use.”

*Looks like she hasn’t guessed the real reason,* Iku thought, trying to slow her pounding heart. Her friend, who never let her guard down, would probably see her true motivation as weakness.

“Oh, ow ow ow. My arm still hurts from where that stupid instructor twisted it. I’m going to bed.”

“You know, you’re a terrible liar.”

Though Shibasaki dismissed her friend’s explanation, there was no indication that she was getting ready for a renewed attack. She used the remote control to turn down the volume on the TV. Apparently she was going to respect Iku’s pretense of sleepiness. She could be blunt and sarcastic sometimes, but she was a good friend who knew when people needed space. Iku crawled into bed and pulled shut the bed curtains.

★

Reading had always been a great love of hers.

It was partially her parents’ fault, who in their desire to make Iku more ladylike had encouraged quiet hobbies like reading. However, she never took as much pleasure from piano lessons or flower arranging as she did from reading stories. Since the more she read the better her parents’ mood became, she naturally began to read even more. When she was young, her two hobbies of reading books and running wild with her brothers had coexisted comfortably.

However, others had seen the two as incompatible. During her six years of elementary



school, the sight of Iku reading in the classroom would infallibly provoke the comment “that looks so wrong” from her classmates. The stereotype that athletic children hate books was firmly rooted in the minds of those around her.

If there were times when Iku enjoyed dodgeball, there were also times when she couldn’t stop thinking about what would happen next in the book she was reading. This seemed perfectly natural to Iku, but for her elementary-school-aged peers it was hard to understand. Before they acquired vocabulary like “anomaly” or “breaking the mold,” they would say things like “Reading isn’t right for Iku, it’s weird”—and every time, she would hurt a little bit inside.

*What’s so wrong about it? Am I not allowed to read if it doesn’t “look right”? Is it that weird that I like books? It would take her a few more years to realize that what the girls were really saying was I want to play dodgeball too.*

Her heart was still a little scarred from when she was laughed at by the boy she liked at the time for reading *Anne of Green Gables*.

Heeding the cries of her wounded emotions, she stopped reading in front of people after she entered middle school. She recreated herself as a track-and-field jock, which people seemed to find more harmonious with her personality, since they never laughed or looked at her strangely.

She continued doing track through high school, justifying it to herself—*I guess it suits me, and anyway, I could use the exercise*. Since it eventually decided where she was going to college, she felt it was a pretty good outcome.

After the last track season was over she found herself with time on her hands, and timidly started borrowing books from the school library. But this time, no one laughed at a large, athletic high school senior reading books. Instead, “What? Iku, you like reading too? I love books!” her friends would say excitedly, and recommended their favorites to her. Thus, her literary horizons grew even broader.

*I guess it’s not strange for me to like reading*, she thought, and the scars that she had carried since elementary school began to show signs of healing.

In the fall of her last year of high school, she received thrilling news—at least, thrilling to her.

After ten long years, the concluding volume of her favorite fantasy series as a child would be published.

Iku learned this news on a site dedicated to publishing gossip, run by a certain non-profit organization. It was a difficult site to find and follow, since its overseas servers were often moved in order to thwart the Media Improvement Committee’s attempts to shut it down, but—*Thank God I was following it!* She did a dance of joy in front of her computer.



Only one thing worried her.

Information about publications that met the Improvement Committee's standards for morality was freely circulated. But this site only dealt with "targeted" books. Books targeted for censorship were prohibited from being sold by mail order; they could only be obtained directly from bookstores.

Checking the information, it appeared that the standards violation consisted of a few instances of "undesirable" language in the book's text. Well, even the Improvement Special Agencies, the proxy organizations of the Media Improvement Committee, had a limited number of personnel. It would be impossible for them to carpet-bomb every bookstore in the entire country simultaneously. Big bookstores in urban areas probably got first priority. Seizures were prioritized by the gravity of the violation; the book Iku wanted was probably low on their list. *And this is a rural area—it'll be all right.*

But as it turned out, it wasn't all right at all.

The day the book came out, she went to a bookstore near school. She found a few copies stacked discreetly in a corner of the children's section. But the moment she picked it up—

Blue-uniformed troops burst through the entrance. The man who appeared to be in charge thrust an envelope at the woman at the register.

"Dated October 4th of the 26th year of the Seika era, Improvement Order number 3075! Read it!"

The woman opened the envelope with a shaking hand and took out a document. By the time her eyes had reached the bottom of the paper, the commander was shouting again.

"In accordance with the notice presented in Improvement Order number 3075, as representatives of the Media Improvement Committee and its chairman Onodera Shigeru, we will be performing an inspection as prescribed in the Improvement Act, Article Three! Removal of any book from these premises is forbidden!"

The Improvement Special Agency—it was the first time she had seen them in person.

*Today of all days! What am I going to do?* Iku immediately hid the book under the blazer of her school uniform. It wasn't against the law to purchase a censored book—if she could just buy it somehow! The register was closed, but she could pay for it later. They store would definitely understand why she had hidden the book.

*I want to read this book so badly. I've been waiting for ten years to see how the story ends—I need to know.*

The Improvement Committee troops tore through the store, throwing "questionable books" one after another into a container they had brought in. There was not one iota of respect for the books evident in their actions. In the container she could see books with bent, folded, and ripped covers.

*This is horrible. Why do they have to be so violent?* She couldn't bear to look anymore and



averted her eyes from the container. *I'm sorry I couldn't hide you too. I'm sorry, the only book I can save is this one.*

The faces of the storekeepers as they watched the inspection were just as heartbreaking. They were grieving for the books. Since the losses on confiscated books were shared between the publisher and the agent, the bookstores only lost the sales opportunity and the expected profit, so it wasn't a direct monetary loss. Even so, it was an awful thing, to have their books targeted. The Improvement troops took no notice of their sorrow as they swarmed over the bookshelves.

“What are you hiding there?!”

She only realized that she was the subject of his questioning after he grabbed her arm and forced it up.

“No...!” She struggled, but he yanked open the front of her blazer. The book she had hidden fell to the floor. Suspicious, the man picked it up. Seeing it, one of his teammates yelled, “Hey, take that one too!”

“No! Give it back!” Seeing he was about to throw it into the container, Iku grabbed his arm and clung tightly.

“Let go! Or do you want to go to the police for flagrant shoplifting?”

For an instant, her heart froze at this hurled threat. *Wait, no. I'm not a shopli—* Suddenly looking at the people around her, she saw the distressed middle-aged shop owner shaking his head at her. *Don't defy them,* he was saying.

*He knows. He understands why I did it.* Her stomach constricted.

“Fine! I'll go! Manager, call the police and tell them I'm a shoplifter! I'll go to the station with this book that I stole!” After all, without the stolen merchandise one couldn't prove a charge of shoplifting. The commander tsked, annoyed.

“Shut up and let go!” He thrust her away with all his strength—

But the second before she fell spectacularly on her backside, someone caught her. When she turned around, she found a young man in a suit holding her up with one hand.

Slipping gently to the ground, Iku looked up and watched as the young man stepped up to the Improvement trooper and preemptorily plucked the book out of his hand.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

The young man reached into an inside pocket and pulled out something that looked like a badge. Brandishing it at the angry man, he announced, “This is the Kantou Library Force! I hereby choose to exercise my right as a Library Officer Third Class to gather materials freely, as accorded in the Library Laws, Article 30! By the authority granted to me by the Library Law enforcement regulations, I designate these books as my discretionary selection!”

She watched from behind as the man made this declaration in a ringing voice. A single





phrase popped into her seething brain.

—*This is a champion of justice.*

She didn't understand the legal dynamics of the situation, but it seemed that the tables had turned. The Improvement Troops ground their teeth, but withdrew from the shop, leaving the books behind.

After the Improvement Special Agency had left, the store owner flew over to the man who had called himself a Library Officer. "Thank you! Oh, thank you, sir...!" he said in a choked voice. Having been unable to stop the violence toward the books, this young man's appearance must have seemed like a godsend to him. The young man listened to the owner with a bemused expression on his face. When he replied, it was in a low voice, quite a contrast to the ringing tones of his announcement.

"I'm sorry that they knocked you around. But before you begin repairs, please deliver these books to the municipal library. We'll arrange for book covers and other equipment now." By "these books," he appeared to mean the ones piled in the container.

Iku watched the proceedings, sitting in a chair the shop had provided for her. The young man had come to her rescue, but when the commander had pushed her she had tried to brace herself and resist, and had ended up twisting her foot. Her shoe and sock were off and medicated bandages had been applied. This too was thanks to the kindness of the shop.

The young man finished his conversation with the owner and looked in Iku's direction. Reflexively she began to get up, but he forestalled her.

"Here." He handed her the book he had taken back from the Improvement trooper. "Go and buy it."

"But—" Iku hesitated. He had told the Improvement troops that he was designating the books as his discretionary selection. Exactly what a "discretionary selection" was, she didn't know, but anyway, they were all getting taken to the library, right?

The young man, sensing her hesitation, added, "Designated books don't all have to be supplied to the library. Since there are several copies of the same book, a few of them would be given back anyway."

*Can I really have it?* Iku tried to shake free of her unease. The man gently pressed her again. "You were the one who was willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this book."

Iku was moved to tears. She took the book, but was too choked up to thank him. She was only just realizing how much the Improvement trooper's threat had frightened and hurt her.

Iku rubbed at her eyes with her fists. The young man gently patted her head. When she



looked up, he had already left the store.

When she went to pay at the register, the cashier noticed that the book's cover was a little torn. They offered to replace it with an undamaged copy, but she said, "It's okay, I'd like this one," and bought it, ripped cover and all. It was fine, even if it was damaged.

*You were willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this book.* Yes, the book that prompted that remark, the book he had handed to her personally, was just fine with her.

Back home, she taped up the torn cover and began to read. Partway through, she found the phrase "an old tramp." Evidently this was the so-called "undesirable" phrase.

*How absurd.* Iku frowned. The series was a pleasant fantasy set in a lively, vivid parallel world. It was easy to understand why the author hadn't wanted to call one of the characters "an unemployed elderly man with an undecided living situation," as the Improvement Committee recommended. She objected as a reader as well; it would break the flow of the story.

The "old tramp" had actually once been a king, before his country was destroyed. He selflessly watched over and guided the main characters. The book was as good-natured as the others had been in the past; there was absolutely no prejudice or discrimination in the use of that word. If you actually read the book, you would know that there was no way it was used in contempt or disdain.

*This is the kind of thing that has to be hunted down for public order and morality? That doesn't make sense.*

She thought about that young man's back, and his ringing voice as he made his announcement. It was perhaps inevitable, given the strong impression the experience had had on her, that she eventually began to think, *I want to be like that too.*

"This is the Kantou Library Force!" she announced to her room, imitating his delivery—then hid her head under the futon, embarrassed.

"What are you yelling about?" her next-eldest brother asked, poking his head into her room looking confused.

"Nooo! Go away!" she shrieked, throwing a pillow at him. It was like he had caught her writing a love letter—not that she had ever written one. Iku was by nature decisive in her resolutions and actions; if she ever confessed her love to someone, it would be straightforward and face-to-face.

She did a lot of research on the library forces. Most of the logistical support was outsourced, so most regular members were either librarians or in the defense forces. If she had to choose—*yeah, probably the defense forces.*

*"You protected this book."* The young man's words had had a powerful effect on her. *I'll join the library forces—the library defense forces. Where that man is is where I will be.*



Chapter 1: Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.

She entertained herself with the thought, *Maybe we'll have a fateful reunion...*

“Oh, DAMMIT!”

“Shut up, Iku!” Her eldest brother kicked the wall of the room next to her. She barely noticed. She had bigger problems.

*I never asked his name! And his face...it was handsome, I think...it had to have been...*

In other words, she didn't remember. She was bad enough at remembering faces—and not just faces, to tell the truth—and the commotion had ensured that his was erased from her mind.

She caught the manager of the bookstore and asked him, but in vain. It looked like the young man hadn't been a member of the local library forces, and though he had arranged the delivery of the books to the local library, he himself was nowhere to be found. In other circumstances his humility would be laudable, but in this case it was damn inconvenient.

Whatever. She wasn't going to be fickle about her decision to join the library forces. Half out of perversity, she researched how to become a member.

According to the guide, the chances of being accepted were better if you were a qualified librarian, and they were the best if you graduated from a university or two-year college after taking courses in library science.

“No! Damn it! They don't have library science!”

“Be quiet!” Her second-eldest brother opened her door and threw a cushion at her.

The college that had scouted Iku didn't have a library science curriculum. There wasn't a way to refund her entrance fee, and besides, they definitely wouldn't take kindly to a change of heart this late.

The story of her scramble to find extension classes in library science while doing the rest of her college work is best left for another time.

*When I was a senior in high school, the Improvement troops entered my local bookstore and confiscated the book I was trying to buy. But there was a library force member present, and he took the book back for me. He was incredibly cool and fantastic and gallant and trustworthy, and I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to protect books that had been unfairly confiscated, just like he did.*

*That's why I want to be in the Defense Force.*

*Maybe I came on too strong?* she thought, as the library force members conducting her interview laughed.

Even so, she was accepted and assigned to the defense force, which meant that they had respected her passion—or at least, that was how Iku decided to interpret it.



The training period for new recruits was nearing its end, and they began to have practical, onsite training at their respective posts.

Shibasaki was assigned to library administration, so her education diverged from Iku's. Every day she trained in earnest at the Musashino First Library. Even the recruits who had been assigned to other libraries in the Kantou region took their turns in the field at the Musashino First Library. They also learned library classifications and management at the Kantou Library Base.

The Kantou Library Base served as a deposit library for the Kantou region, storing and preserving its ever-swelling book collection. It had a massive archive, occupying some ten basement levels, and was so large that occasionally people became lost and needed to be rescued. Its vastness made it an excellent place for administrative training.

After the end of the training period, those assigned to another prefecture would travel to the main library of that jurisdiction and move into the barracks there.

'I'm going to miss you so much, Instructor Doujou! Don't forget about me, 'kay?'" Shibasaki said, feigning ingenuousness. It was impossible to tell how serious she was. Since they would be living on the same base, there would be plenty of opportunities to run into each other. The men's and women's dormitories were in different buildings, of course, but there were many common areas, and they shared the same entrance.

"A little over-the-top, don't you think?" Doujou smiled wryly. "Good luck. You'll do great." *See, why can't he be that nice to me?* Iku brooded bitterly. She and Doujou were still fighting like cats and dogs, pairing up in hand-to-hand combat training and always on the lookout for chances to beat the stuffing out of the other.

*How on earth did this all start?* All she knew was that she had no memory of pulling the trigger herself. Doujou clearly didn't treat her the same as he treated the other women—or indeed, if he was careless, the men.

In parallel with the Defense Force drills and training, the recruits rotated through actual guard duty at the Musashino First Library and the Kantou Library Base. Defense Force members carried the standard-issue lightly-loaded SIG-P220, but the trainees carried only expandable batons.

The Improvement Special Agencies were required to provide a notification document prior to carrying out inspections for the Media Improvement Committee, but it was their modus operandi to present the document immediately before the inspection, making a surprise attack and giving no warning. Iku had personally experienced this tactic on that day in high school. Particularly vulnerable were delivery men on motorbikes, or delivery vehicles one could track online. The Improvement Special Agencies had been known to



board them, then thrust a notification upon unwary drivers; therefore, it was necessary to patrol the area around the route. Yet, the library didn't want to intimidate its users, so it was obliged to station its guards as inconspicuously as possible. And since the Improvement Special Agency would attack even at night or early morning, there was a round-the-clock watch rotation to minimize any openings.

The Library Defense Force was, naturally, a harsh line of work, and it wasn't only Iku's parents who disapproved of women joining. Nationwide, the number of female Defense Force members was still tiny. Recruits with wishy-washy reasons for joining, like "I want to be a civil servant," were the first to drop out, regardless of gender. Even the desk-jobber librarians weren't totally isolated from danger; many of them left as well. The only relatively stable staff base was the outsourced logistical support division, which was completely detached from the library. The Kantou area accepted hundreds of new recruits every year, but holding onto enough of them was always a struggle.

"There's never a shortage of patrons though, right, sir?" she asked Komaki, their security instructor for the day. For security training, the recruits each accompanied an experienced Defense Force member who showed them the ropes, but the six head instructors took turns supervising. These instructors were all very skilled, having been chosen from the cream of the Defense Force. They were almost always paired with a female trainee.

The reason was probably because no one thought she would be as useful in an emergency as the male recruits. That's why there was one woman per training rotation.

Komaki laughed sardonically and answered, "Very true. A sign of the times." Ever since the Media Improvement Act was passed and censorship became commonplace, the number of library patrons had continued to climb year after year. "The list of books targeted for censorship just keeps growing, you see. The harder it becomes for citizens to obtain books freely, the higher the demand for libraries. Especially since the price of books is going up."

Since it was illegal to sell forbidden books through mail order, publishers didn't have a secure market for their books, and so they couldn't print as many editions. On top of that, they also had to swallow the losses incurred if their books were seized. The result was that the standard price of a book had jumped to twice what it was before the Media Improvement Act. When supplies fall, prices rise; that's basic economics. The fantasy book that had set Iku on the path to the Library Defense Force had also been in short supply, and cost more than five thousand yen; she could barely afford it on her allowance. In response, it became popular to create special local library taxes. In an age where it was increasingly difficult for citizens to obtain books, it was important that the library, with its right to gather materials freely, could stay supplied.

A cynic might observe that the Media Improvement Act had actually raised the relative



Chapter 1: Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.

status of the libraries.

As one of the few places where one could freely read forbidden material, the public libraries were always targets of the Media Improvement Committee's insistent censorship. Protecting citizens from questionable forms of expression was the Improvement Committee's excuse for existence.

"What about manga, or things like that? The library only has a little of it."

"The Media Improvement Committee's inspection mechanism is a bit lax when it comes to manga. So comparatively, it's easier to distribute. It's because magazines and comics published like magazines don't have a sample day system."

The timing of the sale of works from the publisher to the agent was different for magazines than for books. Traditionally, the publisher submitted a sample book to the agent five days before the release date. After the Media Improvement Act was passed, a copy of the publication data was required to be sent along with the sample. The sample and the data were collected at the agencies, where they were inspected by officers of the Media Improvement Committee, who had offices in every agency.

But magazines and serial comics were exempt from the sample day system. They just needed to be supplied to stores two days before they went on sale. Compared to books, they had a shorter inspection window. On top of that, the Media Improvement Committee concerned itself primarily with policing the tabloids, pushing the priority of comics and manga down further.

"And in the case of manga, giving the Improvement Committee the publishing data doesn't help their efficiency much. It's double the work, since they have to check both the dialogue and the pictures, so it takes a lot of manpower. And they're published in such volume that it's impossible to physically inspect them all. Even comics published in books still have the manpower problem. So they typically only go after the ones that people have made a big public fuss over."

Komaki added, "The Media Improvement Committee doesn't think much of manga anyway. Basically, it's a low priority for them."

"In that regard books are particularly easy to inspect. They have the sample day system, and they're also all going digital. All you have to do is search for forbidden words or phrases—it takes only a moment. They probably have programs dedicated to doing just that. Out of the mass media, tabloids are their first priority, which is natural, but next on that list is books, for the simple reason that they're easy to inspect. Not to mention that the intelligentsia of the opposition party likes to set its criticisms down in print. If it started doing it in manga, those priorities would probably change."

Komaki suddenly stopped speaking and frowned slightly at Iku. "...anyway, this should have all been covered in lecture. Kasahara-san, have you been paying attention in your





class?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t do well in lectures...but when you break it up and explain it like that, you make it easy to understand, Instructor Komaki.”

Lectures were held in between drills, at the perfect time for a nap. She fully *intended* to pay attention, but she usually lost to her fatigue and accidentally fell asleep. The dry and convoluted style of the professor didn’t help either.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell Doujou,” Komaki laughed. He laughed harder when Iku scowled.

“You sure don’t like him very much, do you?”

“I think he’s the one who doesn’t like me, sir.”

“Not in the least,” Komaki asserted promptly.

—*well, what does he know!* Iku made a face. “Then why is he so hard on me? He doesn’t treat the other girls like that at all.”

“Would you believe it if I said he’s only hard on you because he expects so much from you?”

Shibasaki had offered the same explanation, but—“Never.” She was too contrary to accept that interpretation now.

“Ah, well, Doujou can be pretty childish too. Well then, why don’t you think about why he only reprimands you?”

Instead of defending Doujou to the end, he was backing down—no, not backing down. He was actively scorning him. Iku mentally flinched at seeing such behavior from the typically kind and gentle instructor. Was Instructor Komaki angry?

*Think about why he only reprimands me?* That implied that there was a reason. And that Komaki thought she was naïve for not realizing it.

She tried not to let her dejection show, but Komaki sensed it anyway. He smiled slightly. “I’m not mad, it’s just that you need to get past this.”

She was miserably embarrassed that he had read her feelings so well. Then she felt a gentle hand on her head.

—*ohh.*

The library officer she had admired in high school had done that too. The sense of kindness in the gesture was similar.

“*You were willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this book.*” Would Komaki sound like that officer if he said that? She tried to picture it, but couldn’t really see Komaki saying those words.

“Doujou’s also in the wrong here. He has trouble being impartial toward you.”

*So I wasn’t just imagining it,* she frowned sullenly.

“Since he won’t play fair, I’ll give you a hint. Kasahara-san, you did track for a long



time, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Are drills anything like track?”

*That came out of nowhere. What on earth is he asking?* Puzzled, Iku replied, “Well, it depends on the event, but there are similarities, maybe. There are certain fundamentals that are universal to all physical activities, anyway.”

Komaki smiled, not really listening. *Ignoring me?!* she thought to herself. Oh well, he had a point, and he had made it. Think about similarities, huh?

“Oh!” She noticed an elderly man in a wheelchair waiting in front of the lobby elevator bank.

“A patron in need of assistance! I’ll be right back.” Guiding and helping patrons was an important duty of the Defense Force. They didn’t have to help them find books, though; that was the charge of the librarians who staffed the reference desk.

“No, wait, Kasahara-san!” Komaki called, trying to stop her. Leaving him with a salute, Iku hurried over to the man in the wheelchair. He was an elegant gentleman in well-tailored tweed.

“Can I help you, sir? Where would you like to go?” Iku asked with a smile. The man blinked up at her.

“...the fifth floor, I suppose.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll call the elevator right away,” she said, pressing the ‘up’ button. The library was enormous; it even had a community center. The floors above the second were dedicated to things like reference rooms and lecture halls. The fifth floor was the top floor of the building.

When the elevator came Iku pushed the wheelchair into the car. She made to join him, but he stopped her.

“No, thank you. I should be able to get myself around. It’s very kind of you to offer, though.”

*But...but I don’t mind...* Iku looked doubtful, and the man laughed and admonished her. “Even patrons must have the right to refuse help. Does that make sense?”

“Um, yes, sir...”

*Was I too pushy?* Iku bowed hastily. “Take care, sir.”

The moment before the doors shut, the man replied, “Well done.”

She went back to Komaki. “How did it go?” he asked her.

“I was a little too pushy,” she admitted frankly. Today’s food for reflection. “But, he told me I did well.”

“Did he? That’s good,” Komaki said, grinning.



The next guard rotation, the event she had most feared came to pass. She was paired with Doujou.

“What’s with the surly look?”

“I could ask you the same question, sir. I could even put a bow on it, if you like,” she spat sarcastically. He ignored her. *It’s impossible, Instructor Komaki. We just can’t get along.*

They patrolled the building without exchanging a word, each looking in a different direction. Of course, it didn’t make sense for both of them to be watching the same things, so in a way it was the right thing to do, but the fact that they were doing it because they didn’t want their eyes to meet was rather savage.

It was probably because she dared to avert her face from Doujou that she noticed it. A young man left the reading room, looking around warily, and headed toward the bathroom. Something about it bothered her. Reluctantly, she tapped Doujou on the back.

“Does that patron look suspicious to you?”

“Possibly. Go and question him,” he ordered, and she followed after the man. Doujou assumed a position of observation behind her. He probably judged it a handy opportunity for on-the-job training.

*Let’s see, the speech for taking someone into questioning goes, “Pardon me, but could I have a word with you?”* She mouthed it over and over as she approached the men’s bathroom where the man had disappeared.

“What the *hell* are you doing!?” Her prepared speech flew from her brain at the sight of the man, standing near the sink, taking a utility knife to a magazine. It had a cover on it, so there was no doubt that it belonged to the library. The man cowered, startled, then jabbed his knife toward Iku.

*Are you serious!?! Is this really happening!?!* Her mind was in a panic, but her body moved by itself, brushing away the hand leveling the knife at her. *Calm down, self!*

*This bastard is nowhere near as fast as Doujou!* She grabbed his arm, and used his momentum to sweep his legs out from under him. When she grabbed him it turned out he was nowhere as strong as Doujou; even the female librarians could put up more of a fight.

“...pah!” She wrestled the man to the floor and spat, “Don’t mess with me!”

“Kasahara!” Doujou, hearing the commotion, came running into the bathroom.

“I caught him vandalizing a library book! Perpetrator is secured!” *What do you think of me now!* But when she turned to face Doujou—

“What the hell kind of idiot are you!?” he shouted. *What?* She turned around to see what Doujou was looking at. The man had jumped to his feet and was about to strike her.

Taken completely by surprise, this time she was the one cowering and immobilized. Doujou grabbed her arm and pulled her away with all his might, the shorter man bearing



the tall girl's weight as best he could.

When she heard a dull *thud*, Iku knew that it was the sound of the blow he had taken to protect her.

*No way. No.*

"Instructor Doujou!" she screamed. He thrust her away. From her position on the floor, she watched Doujou flatten the other man, who fell into the garbage can with a crash. Doujou turned him on his stomach, put a merciless knee on his spine, and efficiently slapped on handcuffs—standard equipment for restraining suspects. This time the man lay beaten, having lost the will to fight back.

Doujou turned to Iku and extended a hand. When she took it, he yanked her to her feet, then used the same hand to slap her, hard, across the cheek.

She put a hand to her wounded cheek in dumbfounded amazement, frozen in place with shock. It was hot, and it hurt.

"This has nothing to do with being a man or a woman, or because it's you, or anything like that. In this situation I would hit anyone, no matter who. Your opponent is free, and you call him 'secured'? You're an idiot." He made a noise of contemptuous dismissal, and ran a hand through his hair, where the blow had landed. It came away with blood on it, though only a little.

*That punch was meant for me.* The back of her nose prickled and her throat tightened.

"If you're going to continue to think of this as a sport, quit now. You're not cut out to be a soldier."

And for once, she had no words to reply to that tone of cold disgust.

"He wanted the bikini centerfold out of the magazine, I heard."

That night in their room, the well-informed Shibasaki related the details of the case.

"It's a pretty risqué magazine for not being 'adults only,' right? It got censored right away and you couldn't get it anywhere, but the centerfold was his favorite pop idol, and it was the first time she had done a bikini shot. He thought if he checked it out it would be traced, so he planned to secretly carry it out, cut out the centerfold, and just return the magazine. What a world we live in, that you can get sent to the police and be charged, just over a centerfold."

Shibasaki shook Iku, who was laying facedown on the *kotatsu*.

"Hey, come on, look up. You can't wallow for your whole life, you know."

Iku reluctantly raised her head. Shibasaki exclaimed with such force that she spit in Iku's face.

"Hey! You *told* me to look up!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but boy, he got you good, didn't he. It's the first time I've seen a



girl with a Hiepita<sup>5</sup> stuck on her face.”

“Shut up, jerk.” Her face had swollen where Doujou had struck it, so she had gone to the infirmary, where they had given her one of the adhesive cold packs usually used for bringing down fevers.

“Cheer up. Instructor Doujou attributed the vandal’s capture to you, in his written report. You may have screwed up, but at least he gave credit where credit was due.”

This was probably Shibasaki’s way of trying to cheer her up, but it was having the opposite effect. *Is that just him taking pity on me?* She had been negligent during the capture, allowing the culprit a second chance to attack and even requiring a rescue from Doujou. Iku had no right to any credit for the capture.

She thought about Doujou’s scowl as he pushed a hand through his hair. It was only because Iku had knocked the utility knife away at the beginning that Doujou had come away with just a blow to the head. But what if the man had still been holding the knife—? She shivered.

Worst case scenario, Doujou might have been stabbed in Iku’s place.

*Shit.*

“I’m going to go buy some juice!” Iku said, rising and fleeing the room. She couldn’t take Shibasaki’s attempts to comfort her—she was too disgusted with herself to accept them.

“You silly girl, you’re completely transparent,” Shibasaki whispered to an empty room. Iku would never know.

After hours, the lobby was dim, lit only by emergency lights. Happily, she had met no one on the way, and by the time she reached the lobby the urge to cry had lessened, though it was still touch-and-go. Such was her state, when—

*What are you doing here!?*

Sitting on the lobby sofa, knocking back a can of beer, was Doujou. He noticed her presence, and frowned slightly.

“Why did you have to come along just now?”

“This floor is for both men and women. You have no right to complain, sir!”

*No! That’s not what I wanted to say!* But she couldn’t halt the flow of abuse from her mouth.

“You’ve got something stupid-looking stuck on your face, and you’re weaving like a drunken sailor. Go to bed.”

“Yeah, and just whose fault...!”

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5 A brand of adhesive cold packs; see [http://www.lion.co.jp/en/products/html/pro\\_d018.htm](http://www.lion.co.jp/en/products/html/pro_d018.htm)



She bit back the invective. *I have no right to snarl at him.* Just as she had gathered her willpower, bowed, and begun to say, *I'm sorry, sir*, he stopped her.

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “If you do, I’m going to have to apologize too, for that stupid thing on your face. I don’t want to apologize, so don’t you do it either.”

*The nerve! Selfish even when someone’s making a near-miraculous effort to be civil! Do you hate me that much? Fine, I’ll go ahead and ask, then, if you don’t want me to apologize.*

“Why did you give me credit for that capture?”

Doujou’s head snapped up, and he glared at her, seeming to ask, *How do you know about that?* “Shibasaki told me,” she answered. He looked away, his expression sour.

“You must think pretty well of yourself, to quibble with an instructor’s report.”

“That’s not my p-point!” she blurted, as she lost the battle against her brimming tears. *No! He’s the last person I want to see me cry!* She quickly bent her head, but it was too late. They wouldn’t stop. “I-I don’t have the r-right to be credited.”

*“Are drills anything like track?”* She had solved Komaki’s riddle. *“If you’re going to continue to think of this as a sport, quit now.”* That was it. In the high port drill, she had gone out of commission right after crossing the finish line. That was contrary to the purpose of the drills. It wasn’t a track meet; she wouldn’t win just by crossing the finish line. What was the point of getting that far, if you expended all your energy doing so? How would you manage afterwards? If you relaxed, and let your guard down, and an enemy took advantage of that—

*It would end up like today did.*

She had felled her opponent, and acted like that settled it. *I beat you, game over.* But her opponent had no obligation to play by those rules. If she knocked him down, he could get right back up. Her high rank in the coed drills was meaningless. The men who were slower, but didn’t collapse at the finish line, were more worthy. *They* knew that the point of training wasn’t to get the highest score.

*Where do I get off thinking that I’m better just because I can move a little faster?*

She felt a light hand on her head. When she looked up, she found Doujou standing before her, reaching an arm up to her head.

His hand was gentle. It reminded her of something—come to think of it, Komaki had done the same thing during the previous guard rotation. They behaved the same way in a pinch; maybe because they were friends.

But there was something different about it—aha!

“..You’re much shorter than Komaki is!” she blurted out. She didn’t intend any offense, but Doujou’s gentle air evaporated, and he brought his fist down on her head with a bang.

“I don’t believe you! Hitting me right now, on top of everything! What kind of superior officer are you? What kind of *man* are you?”



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“Don’t get carried away just because someone’s nice to you once in a while. *You’re* just too damn tall!”

The beer was turning sour in his stomach. Doujou spat with a grimace, then grabbed the can from the table, gulped down the remainder, and threw it in the recycling bin.

“Go to bed!” he yelled, walking out. But Iku’s voice followed him tenaciously.

“I won’t quit!”

Doujou turned, a sober expression on his face. She stood, enduring his severe, measuring look.

*You’re not cut out to be a soldier.* She pushed away the pain that had come with that assertion.

“I came here because I wanted to be like the Library Force member I met in high school. If I ever meet him, I’m going to tell him: I’ve come this far because I was chasing after you. So I’m not going to quit. Not here.”

“That thing from your interview?” Doujou murmured. “Is this guy really worth all that?”

“Please leave him alone. You have no right to talk about it, sir.” She cut him off, sensing he was about to say something sarcastic.

“Suit yourself,” he snapped. “Personnel matters aren’t my concern.”

“Thank you sir. I *will* suit myself.” Mixed in with the sarcasm was real gratitude for what he had done this afternoon, though she didn’t particularly care if it came across or not.

As Doujou disappeared down the path to the men’s dorm, Iku faced the vending machines. Buying juice had been her excuse for coming here, but more than that, she felt like she couldn’t get closure until she bought something and went back.

But—“Damn it...forgot my wallet...”

Evidently, she wasn’t going to get any closure today.

★

Her partner on the third guard rotation was neither Komaki nor Doujou.

“Oh, so you’re Librarian First Class Kasahara!”

Library Supervisor Third Class Genda Ryuusuke was a tough, aggressive man of around forty, older than the two of them by about ten years. As the only Library Supervisor among the instructors, he was in charge of all of them.

“I heard the story from Doujou; sounds like he busted your ass. Has the swelling gone down?”

It was hard to tell if he was brave, or just blunt, but ever since they had first meet in the





guards' common room, he had been prodding enthusiastically at all of her sore points.

"Yes, sir, thank you..."

"Well, it was a screwup, but I'd say he should be more flexible. Cut him a little slack, if you can."

She knew he was talking about how Doujou had hit her, but forgiveness wasn't even an issue in this case.

"It was completely my fault. I put Instructor Doujou in danger."

"It was as much his fault as yours," Genda waved her assertion away. "Trainees are expected to make mistakes. You did something stupid, but it was Doujou's responsibility to back you up, and he cut it too close. You're not the only one who has plenty to reflect on."

Iku blinked at this novel point of view.

"Was Instructor Doujou...distressed about it?"

"He was a basket case. Well, it's only natural for an instructor to feel that way. After all, his carelessness almost got you injured."

And *she* had been upset because it was *her* carelessness that almost got him stabbed in her place. It was odd to discover that they had been thinking along similar but opposite lines. She had assumed he was angry at her.

"He told me not to say anything about it, though, so this is just an old man mumbling to himself, okay?" After blathering on so freely and candidly, his sudden attack of conscience was comical. She burst out laughing. She had never had any training from him before, but she was starting to like him. Iku was a simple girl at heart, and she got along well with people who were straightforward and easy to understand.

"All right! Time for patrol."

It would be her first time patrolling in the city. Eager and enthusiastic, Iku followed closely after Genda.

An inspection team of the Improvement Special Agencies usually comprised about ten members, with a vehicle to transport any confiscated materials.

"So if you see more than two vans in the same place, that's when you need to start paying attention. Observe them for a while and see if they all move together in a line. That's how you tell if you've got trouble. And if they all have polarized windows, there's no question about it."

As Iku listened to his explanation, she pointed to the other side of the two-lane road. "What about those, sir?" Vans with the characteristics Genda had described were parked on the shoulder.

Genda looked over. "Ah. Yes, without a doubt. You've got a sharp eye."



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“Not really, I just happened to see them.”

Genda grabbed the radio attached to the back of his belt. “This is patrol calling headquarters, we’ve got Improvement Special Agency vehicles parked in the vicinity. It’s unlikely that they’ll attack today, but I’m raising the alert level by one, over.”

*“This is headquarters to patrol. Roger that, over.”*

Iku watched this exchange and cocked her head in confusion. “Why is an attack unlikely today?”

“Hm? Oh.” Genda answered, replacing the radio on his belt. “They’re parked too close to the library.” Indeed, they had just started their patrol route, and the library was still in sight, right next to the library base. “Sneak attacks are their specialty; there’s no point in striking if they can’t take us by surprise. So patrols make the obvious assumption: that if they’re casually parked this close to the base, that means we’re not the target today.”

*I see. That figures.*

“Then, what is their target?”

“There’s a big new bookstore near the center of town, that’s probably it. They’ve been doing well lately, so the Improvement Agency has its eye on them.”

“So we have to hurry!”

“Hurry where?” Genda looked incredulous.

Iku returned an incredulous look of her own. “The bookstore, where do you think?”

“Not so fast! Civilian bookstores are a demilitarized zone. If we had a confrontation there—anyway, we can’t purposely interfere with an inspection.”

“You have to be kidding me!” *How can he do nothing when he knows there’s going to be an inspection?* “You’re just going to let this go by?” Unconsciously she had taken a scolding tone.

Genda gave her a stern look of his own. “Don’t get the wrong idea, Kasahara. We’re not champions of justice here.”

The words were like an arrow through her heart.

“We’re given power so that we can protect the library. If we tried to thoughtlessly extend our reach, the delicate balance that took thirty years to build would tip, and send us into war. You want fighting in the streets as well as the libraries?”

Genda was entirely correct, but a part of her just couldn’t choke it down.

*“We’re not champions of justice here.”* The library troops weren’t champions of justice.—*but what about him?*

She didn’t remember his face. She didn’t know his name. She had only met him once, briefly, five years ago. The library officer who had returned her book, and said, “*You were willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this.*”

Wasn’t that man a champion of justice? When her book was being targeted, did *he* just



“let it go by”?

*Absolutely not!*

“—we still have the right of discretionary selection!” Iku said, and broke into a run.

“Hey, stop! You can’t...!”

She heard Genda’s voice behind her, trying to stop her, but she had faith in her ability to outrun him even if he chased her. She hadn’t run track for ten years for nothing.

Doujou was supervising practice drills at the library base when his cell phone vibrated. He checked it; it was Genda. *I have a bad feeling about this.* Genda was paired with Iku today.

“Hello?”

“*Your favorite student is on the rampage. Get over here now!*” Genda said, wasting no time on pleasantries. He was breathing heavily. *“I’m running after her, but she’s too damn fast!”*

Doujou got the location from him and hung up the phone. Leaving the schedule with the trainees, he withdrew from drills. “That *idiot!*” he muttered, running. Hearing footsteps behind him, he turned and saw Komaki. Apparently Komaki had seen him leave and decided to follow.

“Something happened, right? Is it Kasahara-san?”

Doujou nodded and explained the situation briefly as they ran. Komaki burst out laughing. “Oh, I thought she’d try that one of these days. That girl.”

“This is no laughing matter!”

At the base’s garage, he jumped into a convenient van. The key was already in the ignition, ready in case of an emergency. As Doujou started the engine, Komaki went around to the passenger side.

“She’s a lot of fun, don’t you think? Such audacity,” Komaki murmured admiringly as he got in.

Doujou looked like he had bitten into a lemon. “You call this fun?”

“Well, but—”

Doujou knew what would come next. He gunned the van’s engine to prevent Komaki from saying it.

When she arrived at the bookstore, the inspection had already begun.

It was unnaturally silent. The cashier spotted her, then let his gaze wander to the back of the store, where Iku could hear sounds of mayhem.

*Leave it to me.* She crossed the floor, and heard a little girl’s wail from the picture books section. Her picture book had been plucked from her grasp by the Improvement troops.



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Her mother held her tightly, but the child's hand flailed for her stolen book.

In that helplessly struggling child, she saw a reflection of herself on that day in high school.

“HEY!”

At Iku's shout, the Improvement troopers all turned to face her simultaneously.

“How dare you treat a child that way! Return that book at once!”

She walked determinedly up to an Improvement trooper and snatched the book away from him. He was taken off guard, and to her surprise relinquished the book easily.

*ID, ID, where's my ID?* She drew it out of the breast pocket of her uniform and brandished it.

“This is the Kantou Library Force! I hereby choose to exercise my right as a Librarian First Class to gather materials freely, as accorded in the Library Laws, Article 30! By the authority granted to me by the Library Law enforcement regulations, I designate these books—” she jerked her chin toward the container piled high with confiscated books “—as my discretionary selection!”

She was confronted by a roar of laughter from the Improvement troops.

*What? What's so funny?* She was baffled. Their commander came forward. “You've got a pretty big mouth for a mere Librarian! The right of discretionary selection granted by the Library Law enforcement regulations is only recognized for Library Officers and their superiors, or didn't you know?”

“No way! Seriously!?” she asked baldly, before she could help herself. *That's right, that man was a Library Officer Third Class, I think—aaugh, I should have listened better in lecture!*

“So we'll be taking that book back now.”

He stretched a hand to the book that she had taken, but Iku resisted.

“What's wrong with this book?”

“The author has a questionable background. She regularly attends anti-Improvement Act meetings.”

“Excuse me? What does that have to do with what she writes? What the hell kind of rationale is that?” Iku argued. As a mere Librarian she had no authority to obstruct the inspection. Even so, she found it hard to give up the book, and as she struggled with the commander, she lost her balance and was thrust violently backwards. *Yikes! I'm going to fall!* But just as she braced herself for the impact—

Powerful arms caught her from behind. *Wait, I know those arms!* She turned around, and sure enough, she had to look down. It was Doujou.

*What's with his timing? It's almost like he's a...a...—a champion of justice.*

“Sorry we're late. But with two Library Officers Second Class and one Library Supervisor Third Class, there shouldn't be a dearth of authority.”



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When she heard Doujou's announcement, she peeped behind him and saw Genda and Komaki. Genda was giving her an expression of menacing fury, but it looked forced. Komaki's face was bright red and he was trying to hold back his snickers.

The Special Agency commander spat contemptuously, and the Improvement troops withdrew, leaving the books behind.

"What the hell kind of idiot are you?!"

Iku cringed at the angry, oft-repeated words. She had been dragged behind the bookstore for a three-on-one barrage of a lecture. The loudest one was, of course, Doujou.

"The right of discretionary selection is a special privilege of Library Officers and their superiors! That's the most basic of the basics! Letting yourself be the butt of the Improvement Agency's jokes—pathetic! When I think that you're my subordinate, I want to cry from the shame. What the hell have you been *doing* in your lectures?"

She was already worn out from repeating "I'm sorry, sir!", but Doujou's anger showed no signs of abating.

"In the first place, the right of discretionary selection isn't something every officer throws around as they feel like it! What do you think would happen to the library administration if everyone went around selecting books that were outside of the budget? We have to buy a certain number of the books that we designate, you know!"

*But*— She protested before she could help herself. "*He* did the same thing, sir!"

"He's an idiot too! Idiots shouldn't emulate idiots, you idiot!!"

*Idiot? Did you just call him an idiot? My Library Officer Third Class? Unforgivable!* Iku glared back at Doujou. Her extra height made her glare that much more powerful.

"You can call me whatever you want, sir, but don't call him an idiot, please!"

"Would you shut up about him? Listen! He's just a rash, rule-flouting, full-of-himself idiot, a disgrace to the Library! We would be better off if he quit too!"

"How dare you say that about my prince?!" she snapped, before she could think about what she was saying. Maybe it was the intensity of her retort, but Doujou was suddenly quiet. *But—did I just say 'prince'?* She was so embarrassed that she threw in the towel, and sank into silence herself.

"Oh, I can't take this any longer!" Komaki suddenly burst out laughing. "Kasahara-san, you're amazing! No recruit has ever made Doujou lose his temper like this before!"

"Forget it," Doujou sighed with displeasure. He went over to the collection of books they had taken from the store, and took out the picture book that had started all the fuss in the first place. Giving it to Iku, he said, "Go on."

"...really?"

"You probably want to reenact that part too, right?"



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*Instructor Doujou, you can be a pretty nice guy sometimes*, she almost blurted out, but stopped herself in a hurry. After all, the next time he offended her, she'd have to take it back.

"Thank you, sir!" she cried, and flew back to the store.

After Iku left, Genda gave a low chuckle.

"Just as I'd expect from your favorite student."

"She's not my favorite student. I'm thoroughly ashamed at her lack of discipline," he replied obstinately, but Genda and Komaki both saw through him.

"'Prince,' huh?" Komaki laughed softly. "Your rival is quite formidable, isn't he?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"For the moment, shall we call him a rival to your authority? As her direct superior, shouldn't you be taking steps to prove your virtue and secure your subordinate against this prince?"

*Whatever.* Doujou sighed crossly once again.

"Well, anyway, that decides it, doesn't it?" Genda said. "Any objections?"

"Of course not," Komaki answered unequivocally.

Doujou remained sullenly silent.

"Here, you can have this back."

The tear-streaked child was resting by the counter, lollipop in hand, probably thanks to the bookstore. Seeing that she was about to throw the lollipop away, the child's mother quickly took it away from her, then bowed to Iku. The child took the book, smiling happily.

"Say 'thank you,'" the mother prompted.

"Thank you," the child said bashfully. Iku was slightly embarrassed herself—surely her blunder didn't merit that cherubic gratitude.

She turned to the mother. "I'm sorry, we really messed up there."

"Oh, don't worry about it!" She shook her head. "We're deeply obliged to you! Today is her birthday, you see. I promised I'd buy her any book she wanted." She hung her head, self-conscious. "They're so expensive, we can't buy them very often." For a young family with a child, picture books were indeed a bit of a luxury item. "I'm glad that I was able to buy her the one she wanted."

*I'm glad that Doujou and the others came when they did*, Iku thought sincerely.

Her sympathies would always be with the hearts of people who loved books—and people who wrote them.

Maybe the Library Forces didn't exist to protect books. Maybe they existed to protect the hearts of those they held dear. —*or maybe I'm getting carried away with myself.*



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“Thank you, nice lady,” the girl smiled. She saw in her the book-loving child she herself had been. It was out of pure reflex that she reached out and patted the child’s head.

*Am I being gentle enough? I feel like I’m getting closer to him.*

The prince she wanted to be like was far, far away, and before that—

*I have to get past that guy!* Slapping her own cheeks lightly to psych herself up, she made her way back to the captured books, and the business at hand.

★

When her training period had ended, Iku, who had expected to enter the Defense Force, was reassigned.

She went to the personnel office to receive her written orders. Underneath her name was written a single line.

*You are ordered to report to the Library Task Force.*

“Wh—...WHAAAAAAT!?”

“Shhhhh!” she was scolded. Iku quickly swallowed her outburst.

“Um, are you sure there isn’t some kind of mistake here?”

The dour-looking clerk with silver-rimmed spectacles checked his documents. “There’s been no mistake. There were two reassignments from the training group: Librarian First Class Kasahara Iku, and Librarian First Class Tedzuka Hikaru.”

She knew the other trainee, Tedzuka, by name; she thought he was in Genda’s group. He was well-known for coming in first in every drill.

“Please report to the Base Commander’s office in a half an hour. You’ll receive your instructions then.”

She stumbled out of the personnel office in a daze. *Wait a minute wait a minute wait a minute. Where did this bombshell drop from? The Library Task Force, that’s the hyper-elite group, the crème de la crème of the Defense Force, everyone only hopes and dreams to join them—*

“Hey, super-elite!”

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. It was Shibasaki, carrying some books; it looked like she was on her way to the archives. Iku didn’t bother with surprise at the speed of her intelligence.

“You know, it’s amazing! You’re the first female Task Force member in the whole country!”

That additional pressure was the last straw.

“W-w-what am I gonna dooooo, Shibasaki!” she wailed.

Shibasaki rolled her eyes. “Hey, I’m working here! I don’t have time to listen to you





whine!”

“But...!”

Shibasaki looked at her in disbelief, as if to say, *Honestly, you fall apart at the weirdest times.* “I told you, Instructor Doujou has high expectations of you,” she said meaningfully—*just how far does her intelligence network go?* “When you drop kicked him from behind, he looked completely awed. He knew then that you weren’t an ordinary woman. It’s wonderful, aren’t you glad to be your teacher’s pet?”

“I am not...!”

“Oh, stop with the false modesty. I appear to be at a bit of disadvantage for now, but I won’t concede just yet.” Shibasaki winked. A wink was a powerful weapon in the hands of a girl as gorgeous as she was, and even Iku’s heart skipped a few beats. ...but wait,

“Shibasaki, what did you mean by...?”

“I don’t know, what could I have meant? See you later!”

Shibasaki gave her the slip, and Iku could hear her rhythmic footsteps as they disappeared toward the archives.

At the appointed time, Iku made her way to the Base Commander’s office. The traffic in that wing consisted almost entirely of important people, and looking at the rank insignia of the people she passed, she saw only Library Officers and their superiors, Library Supervisors. As the only Librarian, Iku felt intimidated. When she finally made it through to the Base Commander’s office, she ran into a tall young male recruit. His rank insignia showed he was a Librarian, same as Iku.

“You must be...Librarian First Class Tedzuka?”

“I am. And I suppose you’re Librarian First Class Kasahara.”

His manner went beyond cool into cold, and his gaze made Iku feel as though she was confirming some suspicion of his.

Iku tried to draw on the camaraderie of their shared rank. “I’m so glad I’m not the only one! I’m so nervous... I can’t believe I was chosen for the Task Force!”

Tedzuka snorted. “I can’t believe you were chosen either.”

*Excuse me? Where is this subtle aggression coming from?* When she tried to respond with a glare, Tedzuka knocked on the door.

“This is Librarian First Class Tedzuka, excuse me for intruding.”

*Oh, darn it.* “This is Librarian First Class Kasahara!” she called, following, and lined up next to Tedzuka. They bowed together, and entered the room. But—

“What!? Why—”

Iku was taken aback when she saw who was sitting at the desk. Smiling at her was the wheelchair-bound elderly man. He had cast aside his well-tailored tweed in deference to the season, but it was the same person.



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“What are you doing here, sir!?”

“What kind of idiot are you?”

She turned toward the direction of this taunt, and saw Doujou standing against the wall, glaring at her with a terrifying expression. Genda and Komaki were with him.

“He’s the commander of the base! Show some respect!”

Komaki was bright red and chuckling. It seemed he was an unexpectedly merry person. *Oh, I see, that’s why*—When she had gone to help the “patron in need of assistance,” he had tried to stop her for some reason. Apparently he wasn’t a patron after all.

“Thank you for your assistance the other day.”

*Oh, this is so embarrassing.* Iku’s shoulders slumped. However bad her memory for faces was, she should have at least tried to remember the Base Commander’s. But as she recalled, at the induction ceremony, he had been walking with a cane.

“At ceremonies, I try to walk as much as I am able,” he said perceptively. He had candidly guessed correctly her innermost thoughts—her shoulders slumped even more.

She heard a snigger beside her, and glared at Tedzuka out of the corner of her eye. *Ugh, how rude!*

The Base Commander picked up some documents from his desk.

“On this day, June 25th of the 31st year of the Seika era, I hereby assign Librarian First Class Kasahara Iku and Librarian First Class Tedzuka Hikaru to the Library Task Force, on the recommendations of Library Supervisor Second Class Genda Ryuusuke, Library Officer Second Class Komaki Mikihisa, and Library Officer Second Class Doujou Atsushi.”

Iku unconsciously looked at Doujou. He must have been aware of her gaze, but he continued to face the front with a serious expression, and resolutely did not look at Iku.

*...but, he gave me a recommendation.*

“Approved by the Commander of the Kantou Library Base, Inamine Kazuichi.”

“I, Librarian First Class Tedzuka Hikaru, humbly accept this appointment,” Tedzuka said, saluting.

Iku quickly saluted as well. “I, Librarian First Class Kasahara Iku, humbly accept this appointment!”

Genda faced the two of them and grinned broadly.

“Welcome to the Library Task Force, soldiers. We expect great things from you, so you better work hard!”

“What?” Iku found her voice again. “Don’t tell me the three of you are also—?”

“You really don’t know anything, do you?” Tedzuka whispered disapprovingly. *I think I’m really going to hate this guy,* she decided at that moment.

“Do you have a problem with that?” Doujou asked in a spine-chilling tone.

“No, sir,” she mumbled. Doujou scowled.



Chapter 1: Libraries have the right to gather materials freely.

“Thanks to the incident a few days ago, I realized that there were significant gaps in my training of you. From today onward, we’re going to *thoroughly* fill in those gaps.”

*Eep!* She flinched involuntarily.

Before she could surpass him, he was going to put her through the wringer. The future looked very gloomy indeed.



## Chapter 2

Libraries have the right to make  
materials freely available.

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After entering the Library Task Force, Iku and Tedzuka faced an additional month and a half of training. Most of it was spent at a training facility the Library kept in Okutama, where they practiced marksmanship and bivouacking.

*Most of the offense and defense of the library is street fighting—why are we practicing how to pitch tents?* She asked Genda, who was their commanding officer, but all he said was “For the atmosphere!” The question set Komaki off laughing again, and he neglected to actually answer. Doujou put on his customary just-bit-into-a-lemon face and replied, “Two reasons. One, we try to train Task Force members in a broad variety of skills, so that they’re prepared to handle any and every situation. Second, we try to increase the confidence of members by forcing them to brave harsh training.” It was a fairly plausible explanation, except—*That doesn’t sound like harsh training at all, though*, she almost burst out. But she realized it would probably make Doujou angry again, and resisted the temptation. *I’ve become so mature!*

“Ooh, special training in Okutama? Bring me back some Task Force *manjuu*, okay?” With those offhand words, Shibasaki sent her on her way. But—*there’s no way in hell anyone’s going to be selling something like that.*

The training facility was deep in the Okutama mountains, surrounded by nothing but untamed wilderness as far as the eye could see. The only man-made structures were the shooting range, track, and indoor barracks and quarters. They took up only a very small part of the grounds; the rest was open fields and disgustingly dense woodlands. It was familiar scenery for Iku, who had been raised in the country.

The Library Task Force of the Kantou Library was a little fewer than fifty men strong, counting Iku and Tedzuka. It was a small number considering that they had to cover all of Kantou. However, there were few situations that required all members to be deployed at once—so in a sense, it was about the right size.

The force was divided into small five-person squads. Every three months, they underwent special training at the Okutama facility, two squads at a time. When a new member joined, his squad joined two others for a month and a half of intensive training. This year, Doujou assumed command of a new four-person squad, taking on both Iku and Tedzuka, and Komaki as his aide. Doujou was also the instructor in charge of the training. From Iku’s perspective, with Genda, Doujou, and Komaki acting as her instructors again, her chain of command hadn’t changed at all—no breath of fresh air for her.

They did some indoor training at the barracks, but since that could also be done back at the base, they naturally concentrated on the facility’s unique capacity for marksmanship and bivouac training. Defense Force members were only trained on handguns and submachine guns, at indoor shooting ranges, but Task Force members also learned how to handle



rifles and automatic weapons. There was especial interest in determining long-range riflery aptitude, and cultivating snipers.

“What does the Task Force need snipers for?” At the outdoor shooting range, Iku held her rifle, flabbergasted.

Doujou answered carelessly. “In preparation for another Nightmare at Hino.”

“Nightmare at Hino?”

The moment she said it, Doujou’s eyes flashed. “That was in your lect—!” he began to say, then blew out a hissing sigh. “...but of course, you weren’t paying attention.”

“I know the Hino Library!” Iku protested reflexively. There was not a Library trooper alive who did not know the Hino Library in Hino, Tokyo. Founded in 1965 as a single bookmobile, the Hino Library had achieved an astounding circulation for its time. It was legendary for being the first library to put into practice the ideas espoused in the “Report on Management of Public Libraries in Medium and Small Cities”: that the small public library, prioritizing service to the people of its community above all else, was the truest example of what it meant to be a public library.

“If you had told me you *didn’t* know the Hino Library, I would have risked my own neck to make sure you were fired! Knowing such a basic thing is nothing to be proud of!”

The soldiers all around them all burst out laughing. In their midst, she heard a scornful snicker. It was Tedzuka, who was standing beside her. *Aaah, damn but he gets on my nerves!* He had made the worst possible first impression on her, and things had only gone downhill between them during this training period. Iku didn’t know what it was about her that stuck in Tedzuka’s craw, but he recklessly strove to beat her in every exercise.

“Tedxuka, please enlighten her.” Iku scowled at Doujou’s choice. She would rather listen to Doujou, even if he were scolding her the whole time, than be lectured to by Tedzuka. But Doujou flashed her a withering look. “Mortifying, is it? Why don’t you make it so you don’t have to be lectured by someone in your own class?”

Doujou knew she and Tedzuka were constantly at each other’s throats. Which meant he was punishing her on purpose. *Arg, nasty as ever!*

A triumphant smile showed on Tedzuka’s profile. Shooting a glance at Iku, he began to speak.

“The Nightmare at Hino was an incident that took place twenty years ago, on February 7th of the 11th year of the Seika era, in which a political organization sympathetic to the Media Improvement Committee attacked the Hino Public Library. By violently crushing the Hino Library, which embodied the ideals of the Chusho Report and had become a symbol for all modern public libraries, they hoped to extinguish the spirit of the Library Defense Forces, established by the Law of Library Freedom.



Chapter 2: Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

“At the time, the Library Force was not yet established as an organization, and the cooperative network of surrounding libraries was slow to respond. The result was a horrible tragedy which resulted in twelve deaths on the Hino Library’s side and extensive damage to the library’s collection. Because the attackers had more firepower than they should have, the involvement of the Improvement Special Agency was suspected, as it had already at that time gained the authority to bear arms. A police investigation was opened, but they found no evidence. Even today it is unclear if the Media Improvement Committee was involved.

“Because of this incident, the Library Force was founded, establishing branches in ten different regions in Japan, each having jurisdiction over several smaller localities, and its current organizational system was instituted.”

The troops around them raised an awed “wowww” at the conclusion of Tedzuka’s smooth recital.

“You’re good enough to teach a lecture,” Doujou said admiringly, probably the highest compliment he was capable of giving.

“Thank you, sir,” Tedzuka saluted. “But personally, I can’t believe that someone in the Library Task Force wouldn’t know such a basic thing already.”

*Dammit, how dare you!* Iku jutted a lip out in sullen displeasure. *I knew about that incident—I just didn’t know the details, or what it was called...* She continued to grumble internally, inventing excuse after excuse—but Tedzuka had shown that he was miles ahead of her, and ultimately there was nothing she could say back to him.

“I take back what I said,” Doujou said suddenly. Tedzuka blinked. “You’re an excellent student, but you’re not yet ready to be a teacher. You and Kasahara were selected for entirely different, but equally valid, reasons. Don’t judge her by the same standards you use for yourself.”

Tedzuka’s cheeks flushed scarlet with anger. With difficulty, he controlled his expression and shut his mouth.

Watching him, Iku cocked her head in puzzlement. *It sounded almost like Instructor Doujou was sticking up for me—don’t tell me he was sticking up for me? It wasn’t like I asked him to or anything—*

As she was thinking this, Doujou directed a follow-up punch at Iku. “And you. Rather than saying you’re not ready to teach, I would go so far as to call it flat-out impossible. Don’t get any funny ideas here.”

Iku was used to such abuse and took it in stride. “Oh, thank goodness,” she sighed. Doujou gave her a funny look. She explained, “I thought you might have been defending me, Instructor Doujou. That would have just been too unbelievably creepy.”

“Smart mouth,” Doujou snapped. He turned to the other soldiers gathered in the





shooting range and gave them the signal to begin, then left to take up his supervisory position.

Tedzuka turned back to Iku. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Excuse me!?” Iku was forced to return his glare. “Are those ears stuck to the side of your head just for decoration, or what? What part of that exchange could possibly be heard as flattering? I don’t know what your problem is with me, but give it a rest once in a while, would you?”

Tedzuka ignored her filibuster and took his place in line at the shooting range.

“You guys really don’t get along, do you?” the older members murmured in wonder, but Iku didn’t think that was her fault at all.

“Not quite, Kasahara-san,” Komaki said, checking Iku’s firing target with binoculars. “Only half of them even hit the board with the target on it.”

“I *think* I’m aiming right...”

“How good is your eyesight?”

“20/10, sir,” she answered. Komaki whistled.

“Better than mine. So you can *see* the target. Are you pulling the trigger too loosely?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m squeezing hard.”

“Maybe you don’t have enough strength in your arm. Let’s make a goal for you: learn to hit the board with every shot by the end of this training period. I won’t ask what *part* of the board they hit, okay?”

Next to Iku and her lowered standards, the soldier who was checking Tedzuka’s results announced that he had hit the target with every shot. Komaki looked at Tedzuka’s target too, but it didn’t take binoculars to see that the head marked on the target was shot completely through with bullet holes.

“Librarian First Class Tedzuka is something, all right. It’s possible he’ll be a sniper,” Komaki murmured casually.

This statement lit a fire under Iku. “Let me have more training time. I’m sure I can do it too!”

“No.” Komaki refused point-blank. “This army doesn’t have the budget to allow soldiers to use up ammunition developing skills in a field they have no aptitude for. Put the right person in the right place—that’s the golden rule of this penniless force. It’s cheaper to make Librarian First Class Tedzuka a sniper than it would be to make you one, Kasahara-san. There’s no need to make snipers out of everyone.”

She had never expected economics to stand in the way of enthusiasm, but Iku had no choice but to accept this, and held her tongue.

Komaki continued, “Kasahara-san, you just aren’t strong enough. Rifles are more than



you can manage unless you can hold them steady and aim them well. It's too bad—you've got the reach, but not quite enough strength.”

“Wait, but—” Iku, whose defining characteristic since she was young had been her size, had never been criticized for being too weak before.

“Ah, but Kasahara-san, you're agile. I believe you can use that agility to cover up any lack of physical power.” Komaki lightly bopped Iku on the head. “Play to your own strengths. There's no point in competing with Tedzuka.”

She hunched her shoulders; he had read her like a book. But—*in what ways am I stronger than Tedzuka?*

The thought put an inevitable frown on Iku's face.

Tedzuka wasn't even aware of the existence of a female recruit named Kasahara Iku until he was approaching the end of his training period.

He had already heard unofficially from Genda that he would be assigned to the Library Task Force, when he heard that there might be another new member from among the trainees, a Defense Force candidate by the name of Kasahara Iku.

Frankly, he had assumed he would be the only one chosen this year, so his interest was piqued. He started watching her, trying to discover what she was like—and was bitterly disappointed by what he saw.

She was thick-witted and emotional. He was forced to admit that she had some amount of physical prowess, for a girl. However, her performance in the classroom was abysmal, and he had heard that she often fought with Doujou, her instructor, over stupid things. Tedzuka recognized Doujou's skill and efficiency as a superior officer; thus his estimation of Kasahara Iku, as someone who constantly bickered with him, went down accordingly.

*An idiot who feuds with a talented man.* She was the type of person Tedzuka hated the most.

Yet, this person was a candidate for the Task Force, meaning she was judged as being equal to Tedzuka—*why am I being grouped with this moron?* His antipathy to Kasahara Iku grew stronger, in spite of never having met her.

Besides, thanks to her clumsiness during guard rotation training, Doujou had been wounded, even if it was a slight injury. He had thought that this would put an end to Kasahara's candidacy, but in the end, there were two trainees chosen to join the Task Force this year.

Concerning his first meeting with Kasahara outside the Base Commander's office—maybe she felt an affinity with him because they were both trainees, but from the start she had been much too familiar in her address, and this too had gotten on his nerves.

*Don't equate yourself with me.*



*“I can’t believe I was chosen for the Task Force!”*

He wanted even less to be equated with her. *This girl doesn’t have a clue.* She had some physical ability, perhaps, but that was a lucky accident of birth. The more Tedzuka thought about it, the less he was able to understand and accept Kasahara’s selection for the Library Task Force.

Thus—

“What do you think of Kasahara?”

He had been called to Genda’s office after practice specifically to be asked this question, and he had no answer for it. He responded impulsively with a stock phrase.

“Not much.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

“I don’t pay much attention to her.”

Genda laughed down his attempt to bring the interview to a swift close. “That’s a lie.”

Outraged, and forgetting that his opponent was his commanding officer, he brought his brows down in a sharp frown.

“It’s only natural that you’re interested in her. You’re wondering why we picked *her* at the same time we picked you.”

His face stiffened before he could erase its expression. He felt like he was being toyed with.

“—*apparently*, it’s not something I can judge by my standards.”

Tedzuka always tried to be humble and polite with his superior officers<sup>6</sup>, though he wasn’t obligated to do so. That habit deserted him now. *Don’t judge her by the same standards you use for yourself.* The pain lodged in his heart threw those words back, coloring them with sarcasm. Even as he said it, his jaw tightened for an instant, embarrassed to be behaving like a sullen child.

“Men as brilliant as you are rare, but they all seem to have the same flaws. If you drive away everyone who falls short of your level, who will be left at your side in the end?”

That reasoning could only lead to mutual backscratching, as far as Tedzuka could see. A small group of competent people was better for morale than a large group of underachievers, and had more fighting potential. Anyway, “With all due respect, I don’t consider myself particularly ‘brilliant.’ I’m only doing the work that’s ordered of me.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Genda smiled wryly. “*Typical*,” Tedzuka caught him muttering, but he pretended not to have heard. “Well, she’s your only peer. See if you can’t

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6 In Japanese, this sentence said, “Tedzuka always tried to use the personal pronoun *jibun* with his superior officers...” *Jibun* is more humble and polite than the pronoun *ore*, which he slips and uses in the previous sentence.



warm up to her a bit.”

Tedzuka recognized that his superior officers wanted them to get along, but for the present, he didn't see any need for that.

Around the time Iku finally gained some proficiency with the rifle, she found one way in which she was stronger than Tedzuka.

They were practicing rappelling, for emergencies where they would deploy out of the Kantou Library Force's precious all-purpose helicopter. Since it didn't make sense to hunt up an expensive helicopter every time they trained, their first lessons were held at a ten-meter training tower. But during that first lesson, Tedzuka's performance lacked brilliance.

Which wasn't to say that he performed *badly*. But when someone who always aces his exercises gets an average score, it gives the impression that something's lacking.

The secret to maintaining balance while rappelling was to be fearless about jumping backwards. It was the perfect exercise for Iku, former uncouth hick. She used to do the same kind of thing with her brothers, not even using a harness, just a rope.

On her first time, Iku jumped out fearlessly without losing her balance, and heard a stir from the spectators on the ground. After she touched down, she asked about it; apparently everyone had been hoping she would flip upside-down. Many trainees, unable to overcome their trepidation about jumping backwards, made half-hearted jumps and ended up hanging upside-down.

“It's not just many, it's most. We all look forward to seeing it happen when we get new trainees.”

“I'm getting the feeling that you would have preferred me to fail.”

“Well, Tedzuka's unlikely to give us any entertainment.”

“What!? Are you saying that it's a given that *I'm* going to be entertaining at whatever I do?” said Iku, miffed.

Doujou came over and offered his opinion matter-of-factly. “No complaints from me.”

*Huh?* Iku blinked, unconsciously. Used to criticism at his hands, Iku knew that this was as close as Doujou came to unreserved praise.

“If I had to say something, I'd tell you to let the harness take more of your weight.” He paused. “It was a remarkable jump.”

“...are you having me on, sir?”

Doujou looked puzzled at Iku's suspicious tone. She elaborated, “You would never casually praise me, Instructor Doujou. How do you plan on bursting my bubble this time?”

Doujou's puzzlement was replaced with irritation. “Your rappelling is very good, but



we don't deploy out of helicopters very often in the first place, so there won't be much chance for you to shine in actual combat. Still, it's only fair to give you the evaluation you deserve. Accept the compliment in the spirit it was given. It isn't a very common occurrence for you, after all."

*Ouch! I think I understand what the phrase "rapier wit" refers to now.* Iku wrinkled her nose, but Doujou turned away at the same time.

"It's Tedzuka," came a murmur from those around her. Iku looked up at the training tower. *He'll probably be brilliant at this too,* she thought, half jealous, gazing up from below.

Seating himself in the harness, Tedzuka began his backwards descent from the top of the tower, steadily and fearlessly—or did he?

Tedzuka's descent trajectory was vaguely different from the way Iku imagined it would be. He didn't provide entertainment by flipping upside-down, of course, but his jump was weak and his posture was stiff. His descent was subtly protracted; unconsciously, he was gripping the rope to slow his descent.

Their fellow officers didn't cheer like they had with Iku. It was, well, all right for a first try.

In subsequent lessons Tedzuka's rappelling did not improve appreciably. He struggled stubbornly to keep it at a passing level, as the day for helicopter training drew closer.

The helicopter in question was the trusty transport of the Library Force, a UH-60JA Blackhawk<sup>7</sup>, the only one in the whole Kantou region. Its assignment to the Kantou Library Force had been the result of epic feats of diplomacy, though no one knew the details. The most plausible of the various competing theories was that it was a form of non-monetary aid from the Japanese Defense Facilities Administration Agency. The Agency gave aid to the Library Force because the Force had a stabilizing effect on the population around library facilities, and since there were many libraries in Kantou, they received enough aid to pay for a significant portion of their operating budget. Apparently, the Kantou Library Force, taken as a whole, was big enough to rate a free military surplus helicopter. Since most of their guns and other equipment were military surplus from the army or the police, it was quite a likely explanation for the supply channel.

The UH-60JA's cabin had a low ceiling, a common design feature among all-purpose helicopters, and even sitting half-bent, it was easy to hit one's head if one wasn't careful. For rappelling practice, they filled it to capacity, boarding fifteen at a time. Even with the UH-60JA's spacious cabin, it was a tight squeeze.

Iku, glancing around their cramped quarters, saw Tedzuka carefully checking his harness with a grim look on his face. *Is it my imagination, or is his face a little pale? No, it is pale.* Their

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7 A Japanese version of the UH-60 Blackhawk, made by Mitsubishi.



previous practices had given her the idea that he wasn't very good with heights.

While it was evidence that even the redoubtable Tedzuka had a weakness, Iku didn't feel any triumph over it. It was just by chance that she didn't mind heights. Tedzuka usually outclassed her in their other training courses, anyway.

"*You'd be more stable if you were less hesitant when you jumped,*" she wanted to say, but held her tongue. Tedzuka was probably unwilling to admit his own weakness, and even less willing to hear about it from Iku.

Anyway, it wasn't as if Tedzuka's rappelling was all that shaky.

As the UH-60JA hovered several dozen meters above the ground, the troopers slipped out the cabin door one by one.

Iku's turn came, and she descended. Tedzuka was third after her, and though he hadn't shaken his case of nerves, he descended and landed steadily.

The finale of their concentrated training was hiking and orienteering. The group was randomly assigned to two parties, one supervised by Genda and one by Doujou, and expected to navigate by compass to a given set of coordinates. It was estimated that it would take two to three days to cover the distance.

When Genda opened the floor for questions at the meeting room, Iku raised a hand.

"Why is this kind of training necessary for Library Force members, sir?"

What she really wanted to ask was, "*Do you really anticipate some situation where we absolutely must navigate by compass from the Musashino First Library to the Nerima Ward Library?*"

"For the atmosphere!" Genda declared in his usual resounding voice. The troops laughed. He added, "If you have any further questions, you can address them to Doujou." Here Komaki, who had been holding back, burst into peals of laughter.

Iku peeked over at Doujou, who returned her look impassively. "Yes? Did you want to ask me something?"

"...no, sir."

It was bad enough to be told that they would be forced to meander through Okutama for three days; having to hear an explanation from Doujou would be the last straw.

"If you don't ask, you're going to be clueless when you need to know what the objective of the exercise is," Tedzuka hissed from the seat next to her, obviously trying to get her to ask.

Iku never hesitated when someone was picking a fight with her. "Congratulations on having a clue, then; just what I'd expect from the best student in the class. If only the teacher's favorite was more like you, huh?"

Tedzuka looked like he'd been slapped. His eyes flashed. *You wanna go?* Iku lifted her chin belligerently, causing Tedzuka to snort and look away.





“More like the teacher’s your favorite. Quit being so conceited.”

“Oh, come *on!* When am I concei—”

“Kasahara!” Doujou thundered. Iku reluctantly shut her mouth. *Sure, only yell at me! It’s obvious who the favorite is here!* She was completely unwilling to accept Tedzuka’s accusation.

“Oh, and also!” Genda added suddenly. “We’ve had reports from forestry officials of a number of bear sightings, so be careful.”

Iku snapped. “Wh—how are we supposed to ‘be careful’ of *bears!*?” Next to her, the mighty Tedzuka was stricken as well. “You mean, if we’re careful we can completely avoid them? —But, we’re really going through with this orienteering thing even with bears on the loose!? —Hey! Guys! It’s not funny!”

Her giggling seniors informed her, “We hear the same thing every time.” They didn’t appear concerned. Even Genda continued nonchalantly.

“Well, since this is Honshuu, technically it would be just *Ursus thibetanus*, the Asian Black Bear. They’re shy by nature, so if we move in a big group they should avoid us. Even supposing it came down to a one-on-one wrestling match, we wouldn’t make easy prey.”

“Even having the option of fighting a bear is absurd! Anyway, you’re probably the only one in the Library Force who could take one on, Commander!”

“Oh, surely not the only one,” Genda said, looking pleased, but Iku felt that he was lying through his teeth.

“Will we be provided with ammunition?” Trust Tedzuka to ask a practical question.

“Since we’ll be leaving the grounds on our hike, we won’t even carry guns. If the shit hits the fan, every man is expected to handle the situation on his own.”

*What is this, some kind of kung-fu monastery?* Iku sighed and wilted, having lost even the will to protest.

Doujou concluded the meeting. “All right, dismissed, everyone. Kasahara, stay behind. I have some things to discuss with you.”

After everyone had dispersed, Iku reported to Doujou. He began by asking how she was holding up—he had done so during their bivouac training as well.

“I’m fine...it’s just that...”

The problem was the bears.

“I see,” Doujou frowned, scratching his head.

“Well, uh, tell you what. Um, I mean, like the commander said, we’re unlikely to come across any bears if we move in a large group. It’s pretty rare for them to attack even solitary mountain climbers, it’s just that the attacks get a lot of press, or something. As far as I know, no bears have ever actually appeared during orienteering.”

Was this stuttering speech an attempt to reassure her? *Maybe I should thank him.* Smiles





didn't come easily to her around Doujou, but she made an effort. "Thank you, sir. My feelings are slightly relieved." She indicated the extent of her relief with her thumb and forefinger. They weren't very far apart—he hadn't actually reassured her that much.

Doujou smiled wryly. "At any rate, you won't be alone."

Iku stared at Doujou's face, mesmerized. *That's the first time he's ever smiled at me like that.*

*What am I thinking? I'm in love with someone else, kind of.* She suddenly thought back on things Shibasaki had said; Shibasaki, who had been enamored of Doujou since they first enlisted. *I see...if I got to see that smile all the time, instead of being treated like the enemy, I might not think he was bad-looking either,* she allowed.

"You've got the determination, so I think you'll be fine, but orienteering is no walk in the park. Rather than worrying about hypothetical bears, why don't you go rest up and make sure you're in shape for it."

*Hey! That was a dirty trick! You can't suddenly start being nice to me, no fair!*

Flustered, Iku fled.

The two new members were both assigned to Doujou's party, as was only natural, and the hike commenced. They set out at dawn, the two parties each going in a different direction.

Truth be told, Iku soon became too preoccupied to even think about bears. They were well-equipped and it was the summertime, but they were still slogging through more-or-less-trackless wilderness. There were times when they found a path and the going was easy, but for the most part, these mountains didn't have much in the way of trails.

"Damn wisteria-infested mountain..."

As hard as she might try, Iku just didn't have the stamina of most of the male troopers, and she ended up falling to the back of the line. Doujou, as their overseer, was bringing up the rear, so at least she wouldn't get left behind, but it meant she couldn't slow down.

"Something wrong with wisteria?" Doujou inquired, having heard Iku's mutterings.

"Wisteria doesn't grow this thick on well-tended mountains. It's running wild on this one. Well, you could also call it returning to its natural state, or something. The landowner's not keeping it under control. Makes it damn hard to walk through."

"You sound pretty knowledgeable."

"It's because I grew up in the country. Were you raised in the city, Instructor Doujou?"

"I spent my entire childhood in Tokyo. Though, since entering the Force I've seen most of Kantou over the course of my training."

"Oh?" she tried to say conversationally, but it didn't come out.



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“Sorry, never mind,” Doujou apologized, mistaking her silence for annoyance at his chatter.

*He’s really not such a bad guy*, she decided, musing quietly as she walked carefully, watching her step.

After they had walked for a while, Doujou called Tedzuka over.

“Carry Kasahara’s shovel for her.”

Tedzuka didn’t voice any complaints, but his displeasure was writ plainly on his face. Iku herself frowned, reluctant to receive any favors from him, but from behind her the only one Doujou could see was Tedzuka.

“In team activities, personal success does not mean overall victory. Do I make myself clear?”

“...yes, sir,” Tedzuka nodded, clearly unenthusiastic. Iku was even more reluctant to be in his debt. But Doujou had the last word.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Kasahara.” She had been in his training group—he knew when she was apt to grumble. Iku resentfully began to lower her backpack, but before she could, Doujou detached the shovel and handed it to her. *Probably because it’s a waste of energy to take it off and put it back on*. It was against the rules for the supervisor to assist the party in any way, but she was willing to overlook it if he was.

Iku passed the shovel to Tedzuka. “Here. Thanks.” He took it without a word and quickly walked away.

She had proper appreciation for her shovel—without it, she wouldn’t be able to help level the campsite or dig latrines—but she had to admit that it was a lot easier without its weight on her shoulders.

She would repay her debt to Tedzuka by not slowing the party down. Iku picked up the pace and followed after him.

It was just before sundown that they reached their goal, a mountain peak eight hundred meters above sea level. Genda’s party, which included Komaki, had already arrived.

“Well, it was close, but you managed to make it on the day you were supposed to, by a few minutes. Pretty good for having a girl in your group.”

Apparently the officers had estimated a day and half for the ascent, and another day for their group return descent.

Without pausing to rest, they began erecting their tents. As the only female, Iku had one to herself. When that was done, the sun had already set, and they dug into their evening rations.

“I’m going to use the latrine, so don’t come over this way!” *...Man, if my parents found out I was this shameless as an unmarried woman, they might die of shock*, she sighed—it wasn’t



necessarily an exaggeration. As usual, she had concealed the truth of her reassignment from her parents.

Exhausted from the day's forced march, especially the last burst of speed at the end, she crawled into her sleeping bag and immediately fell into a dead sleep.

Iku had a strange dream. For some reason, Tedzuka was screaming. It was really more of a terrified shriek, and she was smugly pleased that the honor student had lost his head for once. *Divine retribution for always picking on me!* she thought with a grin—

“HERE IT COMES!”

A voice woke her from the dream, and something thrust its way into her tent.

It was like flipping from the Dream Channel to the Reality Channel. The sudden chaos made her head spin. *Here it comes? Here what comes?*

*...we've had reports from forestry officials of a number of bear sightings, so be careful...*

“A BEAR!?”

She lashed out at the lump in her tent. Her fist went right through it.

“...or not!?”

She quickly pulled her hand out of the lump, and suddenly the bright light of a high-powered flashlight shone into her tent.

★

“A ha ha ha ha! You did *what?* Kasahara, you, you *punched a bear!*?”

“It's not funny!” Iku yelled at Shibasaki, who was rolling on the floor. But she only laughed harder.

“I can't believe it! You weren't scared by the bear—you *punched it!* What kind of girl would do something like that!?”

“It wasn't a bear! It was fake!”

The thing that had been thrown into her tent was a huge bundle of underbrush, cut and bound up by the troopers who had arrived earlier. They had made two, one for her and one for Tedzuka. Iku was impressed—by their idiocy.

After things had calmed down, they had told her that it was a Task Force tradition, to scare new trainees with bear stories and then throw a fake bear into their tent in the middle of the night.

“Even if it was a fake, you yelled ‘a bear!?’ before you hit it, right? So, that means you thought it was a bear when you punched it! I can't believe you, I just can't believe a girl would do that.”

“Would you stop laughing? I'm trying to vent here! Couldn't you be more sympathetic, like ‘Oh, that sounds terrible!’ Or at least get angry on my behalf!”



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“No, no, I really couldn’t. I can’t do anything but laugh.” Shibasaki finally righted herself and took a tissue from the box on the table, to wipe away her tears of mirth. “See, usually, when you think something’s a bear, you don’t try to fight it, because you know you won’t win. So, since you punched it, you must have thought you could beat it!” A strange froglike sound escaped from her throat. It looked like she was finally in control of her giggles. “It’s unbelievable. No one would do that. No human would do that.”

“...I’m not the only one,” Iku grumbled.

Shibasaki’s ears perked up. “What? What? What do you mean?”

“Not telling,” Iku said, looking the other way. If Shibasaki wanted to know something, she could find out from anywhere.

“Hey, hey, more importantly, where’s my souvenir? My Task Force *manjuu*?”

“In your dreams! The closest convenience store was five kilometers away! If you needed something, you had to ask the lunch lady to go and buy it for you!”

“Wow, I’m impressed that you lived that way for a month and a half. Not bad.”

“No big deal,” Iku said proudly.

“Hey, did anything happen while I was gone?” Shibasaki was nice to have around when she wanted gossip like that. Being away from the base for a month and a half had left her completely out of the loop.

“About two weeks ago, the library director was hospitalized.”

“Really? Finally?”

The man Shibasaki referred to was the director of the Musashino First Library, the library attached to the base. He had an ulcer, or a polyp, or something, and his health was always teetering on the brink of collapse. He was readily identifiable as the man who swallowed a pile of pills after every meal. According to Shibasaki, he had been suddenly taken to the hospital and had emergency stomach surgery.

“He’ll be in the hospital for a while. In the meantime, an acting director was assigned from the administration side, and he’s a bit of a problem.”

“Wait, the assistant director didn’t take over for him?”

“Mmm, seems like there was some tangled political dealing among the brass.”

Authority over personnel matters belonged mostly to the Library Defense Force, but they couldn’t always overcome the power of the administration. Additionally, the administration was divided between those who supported the Defense Force and those who opposed it, and often the Force felt the reverberations of that friction. Essentially, it was related to the struggle between centralization and decentralization of power, but the beliefs of each camp could not be so easily defined and separated black-from-white; there were many various desires intertwined in many various ways, even more complicated than political matters usually were. In other words, it was more than an underling like Iku could be expected



to understand. In any case, it was apparent that the library did not welcome the acting director's appointment with joy.

"I wish the director would hurry up and come back..." Shibasaki complained, with unwonted seriousness.

"What exactly makes him such a problem?"

"He's the Board of Education's yes-man. 'Buy these recommended books! Get rid of these so-called undesirable books!' And it's not just the Board of Education, it's like he's incapable of saying no to anyone with power."

"That's obnoxious! Why would they purposely stick us with something like him!?"

"There's a theory that that's exactly why they stuck us with him," Shibasaki said cannily. "Well, now that you've come back, you'll have duties in the First Library pretty soon, since office training for new Task Force members begins soon. You can judge for yourself after you see how things are."

"...can I ask why you found out our private duty schedules?"

"Hmm, if I had to say, I'd call it a hobby," Shibasaki smiled blithely.

It was perhaps bound to happen, but on her first day of work after coming back from Okutama she discovered that she had been nicknamed "Bear-Killer Kasahara." It wasn't hard to imagine the troopers who had accompanied her during training cheerfully spreading the story to everyone, but she suspected Shibasaki's involvement as well.

Iku met Doujou in the First Library's office before beginning her duties. Because it was inside work, they put aside their patrol uniforms for civilian clothes. Doujou wore a summer suit without a jacket, and Iku was in a pantsuit.

The minute their eyes met, Iku was off and running. "Thank you so much, sir, for your useless advice. Thanks to you, I have a new name, and it's not one I like very much."

"...I warned you, didn't I?" Doujou scowled. He was spoiling for a fight too. "I told you that as far as I knew, no bears had ever appeared during orienteering."

Indeed he had, but, "You could have been a little less cryptic! How was I supposed to infer from that that it was a prank? In fact, the fact that the demon instructor went out of his way to try and reassure me made it twice as believable! Your pitiful attempt at kindness sure backfired, didn't it!"

"So, you would have spilled the beans on the prank, then, the one the commander looks forward to every year!?" Doujou snapped, unexpectedly angry where he should have been apologetic. It shut Iku up at once. Still Doujou pressed her. "I think it's a stupid prank, but you try letting the cat out of the bag! He holds a grudge until the next wave of trainees comes through." Something told her that he had tried it before. "I told them, we shouldn't do it this year, we've got a girl in the group, but they wouldn't listen. As a last resort, I



thought I could at least try and give her a hint!”

“Wh—so you’re saying it’s my fault? My fault that I didn’t get your stupid hint!? You were the one who started it in the first place, Instructor Doujou!”

“...The Bear-Killing Duo is certainly lively for this early in the morning,” Komaki interrupted, cutting through their argument. At the words “Bear-Killing Duo,” both Iku and Doujou felt silent, wearing rueful expressions.

The original “Bear Scare,” which would become an annual Task Force event, occurred the year Doujou and Komaki entered, instigated by Genda. Komaki, very sensibly, had been scared out of his wits, but when they had thrown the simulacrum into his tent, Doujou had screamed, “IT’S A BEAR!” and wrestled it to the ground. This had been such a big hit with Genda that he had declared it a permanent tradition when new members entered the Force. Thus, if you went back far enough, Iku’s assertion that it was Doujou’s fault had some merit.

“I never thought I’d live to see a second Doujou. You two are so much like each other.”

They grew even more rueful. Lowering her gaze and peeking at Doujou, she could see that his expression was surly and his ears were red. It seemed that, naturally, he found the dredging up of his past blunders difficult to bear, and Iku delighted in his air of discomfort.

“Where’s Tedzuka?” Doujou asked rather too seriously—*obviously trying to change the subject*, Iku congratulated herself on noticing.

“He got here early, so I had him go on ahead to the archives.”

“Well, shall we start with lending procedures for the archive, then?” Doujou looked up at Iku. “I’m going to go over everything just once. If there’s anything you don’t understand or remember after that, you’ll have to ask Tedzuka.”

The implication being twofold: *if you don’t want to depend on Tedzuka, memorize everything after just one pass—and I have utter faith in his ability to memorize everything after just one pass*. It was offensive, but that was his honest opinion of her. And as he had guessed, Iku had paid just as much attention to the classification lectures as she had to her library history lessons.

When they met up in the archives, Iku expected to hear some kind of “Bear-Killer” comment from Tedzuka, but he didn’t say anything. Since Komaki had already instructed him in the layout of the archives, she got her instruction from Doujou.

The Musashino First Library had been relocated and expanded after the founding of the Library Base, and now numbered among the largest public libraries in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Accordingly, the size of its collection was enormous, and its underground





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archives were vast. Learning the locations of all the shelves was a chore in itself.

“The organization of the shelves basically follows the Nippon Decimal Classification. Shelves 1 through 4 are Generalities. Half of Shelf 1 is 010, Libraries, then from there to the top of Shelf 2 is 020, Books and Bibliology, next we skip 030 and go to 040...”

His explanation crashed against her like a wave, and had Iku diving for her memo book in a panic, dragging it out of her pants pocket.

“Wait, wait, the top of Shelf 2 is...”

Seeing that she was taking notes, Doujou repeated what he had said—somewhat more slowly. *Gosh, he’s so nice*, came the unlikely thought, as she listened to his words and noted them down. However, as she thought about it, he had never pushed her away when she was actually trying to heed him.

“Ummm, the second row of Shelf 2 is 040—why do we skip 030?”

“030 is Encyclopedias. They’re big and heavy, so we put them on bottom row.”

Waiting for Iku to finish writing, Doujou suddenly asked, “Won’t that be hard to read?”

She kept the memo book in her badge wallet, and it was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. Her handwriting was necessarily tiny, which was what Doujou was commenting on.

“Maybe, but since we’re required to keep our badges on us at all times, I’ll always have it with me, and I’ll be able to look up classifications in a snap.”

“You’ve sure thought it through,” Doujou said. But hot on the heels of this praise, he added, “Well, assuming you have time to look at it,” arousing Iku’s unease.

“What do you mean...?”

“You’ll understand once you start. —Now, materials that are accessed relatively frequently are placed on the open access shelves, but the ones that aren’t are on the moveable closed access shelves in the reserve collection. Sometimes during reshelving, a book is placed in the wrong collection, so if you can’t find a book in the open access shelves, check the closed ones.”

Doujou strode to the next shelf, continuing his explanation, and Iku followed him, taking notes as if her life depended on it.

As it turned out, she had almost no time to peruse her pages of notes.

When a request for material was transmitted from the computer terminal at the reference room counter, an alarm sounded and the computer in the archives spat out a printout. One might guess that standard operating procedure was to take one printout and search for that book, but that was too slow. Ten minutes was an unacceptable length of time to take finding a book—the patrons would complain. The ideal was five minutes, and veterans





were much faster.

Naturally, there was some variability in the timing of requests as they came in, but even during less busy times, it was unacceptable to take too long finding one book. Besides, times when they weren't swamped with requests were rare. Musashino First Library was among the most-used libraries in Kantou. On top of that, it was the end of summer vacation, and the large number of children and students using the library caused the request rate to nearly double.

Doujou's squad of four were the only ones manning the archive, and Iku's shaky grasp of the classification system was quickly becoming a hindrance. She was vague on the secondary subcategories, though there were areas that she knew fairly well, but she was completely hopeless when it came to the tertiary subcategories, and she had no choice but to search entire sections for one book.

The shelves were organized by archive number, and it might have been helpful in her searches if she could associate them with call numbers, but for the moment, Iku didn't have room in her head for any extra numbers.

"Sorry, Tedzuka, which shelf is 756 on?"

"Crafts, shelf 30! Give me a break, you just asked about the Crafts shelves!"

The air of the archive was thick with Iku's questions and Tedzuka's angry, shouted replies.

When the requests had slackened off, Komaki called everyone together. The clock said noon; most of the patrons had left to eat lunch, and the wave of requests had temporarily ebbed. The next wave wouldn't hit until the afternoon.

When they met in front of the computer terminal, Doujou and Komaki were both sweating, in spite of the archive's very effective air conditioning. *Ouch*. Iku slumped miserably. These two had to make up for Iku's ineptness, as well the hit to Tedzuka's productivity she had caused with her questions. Moreover, the checking, processing and shelving of books that were returned to the archives had completely halted.

"These three books..." Komaki picked up some books from beside the elevator and showed their spines to all of them. They were books that Iku had found and sent up to the reference room. "...were sent back." Komaki's voice was quiet, but he might as well have been shouting. Iku winced. Patrons had canceled their requests rather than wait any longer. Iku remembered that each of the three books had taken a very long time to find. "We've also gotten complaints from the counter. Something to keep in mind."

"It's all your fault!" Tedzuka rebuked her. Clearly he had been waiting for an opportunity to do so. "How the hell could a Task Force member not know the classification system? You knew that we were going to start training in library duties, so why didn't you make sure you had the minimum knowledge required for the job!?"



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“What? But...” Iku defended herself reflexively against his attack. “I was originally going to be in the Defense Force! I didn’t think I’d ever need to know anything about library duties!”

“You joined the Task Force *how* long ago? You’ve had plenty of time to study up!”

“But right after I joined, we went to Okutama for training! And we started library training right after we got back!”

“We had two days off in between! Don’t tell me you couldn’t have at least brushed up on the classification system then!”

*But...* the protest died in her throat. She couldn’t bring herself to raise her head.

During her two days off, she had certainly had time to gossip with Shibasaki. Iku wished she could crawl into a hole and hide. Tedzuka’s constant sneering at her cluelessness came back to her. *I thought they were going to teach me everything I needed to know, so I didn’t bother to study at all.* She had mocked him back: “*Congratulations on having a clue.*” But it wasn’t anything to laugh at; it really was commendable.

“You’ve got a horrible memory and you know it, and of course you couldn’t memorize the layout of all the shelves after just one pass, so why didn’t you come to the archives early and do a little preparation beforehand? God! Useless idiots who don’t even try to improve are the worst! You hold everyone else back, and the only thing you do your share of is whining! Useless people shouldn’t be allowed to talk!”

“Tedzuka!” Doujou barked. Tedzuka stopped as if the wind had been knocked out of him.

Komaki picked up where Doujou had left off. “Enough. Being right doesn’t give you a license to say whatever you want.”

Tedzuka closed his mouth, a surly expression on his face.

“Anyway, let’s decide how to divide up the work for the rest of the day,” Doujou submitted pragmatically. Iku, spared by the change of subject, breathed a small sigh of relief. “It’s a bit early, but we’ll get the requests from other libraries sent around. Kasahara, you can be in charge of those. They’re sent out at night, so you don’t have to worry about time. In return, I expect you to exert yourself and learn the layout of the archive, understood?”

“Y-yes, sir,” she mumbled, her throat hoarse with imminent tears.

“The rest of us will be responsible for requests from our patrons, as well as all other duties. Are you up to the task?”

“Yes, sir!” Tedzuka’s voice was bold and firm. It was only natural. Tedzuka had probably never done anything shameful in his life.

Doujou used the intercom to buzz the reference room. “Hello, this is the archives... oh, it’s you. Would you send all the requests from other libraries down, and then...” As he spoke, Doujou turned away from the others and lowered his voice, so the rest of the



conversation was too quiet for them to hear.

Some time after Doujou had ended the exchange, there was a knock on the door, and Shibasaki poked her head in.

“Afternoon! I come bearing files!” She waved a sheaf of papers. “Ooooh, Instructor Doujou! I haven’t seen you in *ages*! Why didn’t you come see me after you got back from training? I’ve missed you so much!”

Iku, and even Tedzuka, started at Shibasaki’s suspiciously ingenuous tone. Doujou only frowned slightly. This technique of Shibasaki’s had an immediate effect on most men, but it looked as though Doujou was immune.

“Looks like you’re pretty busy today! If you like, I can help you out...”

“No thanks. I bet it’s a war zone up at the counter too, today. They probably need your help.”

“I’d throw them over in a heartbeat if it was for you, Instructor Doujou!”

“Don’t bother. We really don’t need help.”

Komaki laughed at Doujou’s successful disengagement. Shibasaki pouted, which was to her benefit. On a beauty like her, it was coquettish and cute. “Are you sure? Instructor Komaki, you’re not going to stand for this, are you?”

“Sorry, looks like Doujou’s going to be stubborn about it,” Komaki apologized, laughing. Next to him, Doujou glowered.

“Enough! If you’re done here, get back to your station!” he shouted.

“Yes, sir,” she shrugged calmly, and walked over to Iku. *Huh?* Taking no notice of Iku’s confusion, Shibasaki smoothly linked arms with her.

“While I’m at it, I’m going to borrow her for a while, okay?”

“What? Wait a minute, Shibasaki!”

“You haven’t had lunch yet, have you? Come eat with me.”

“I still have work...!”

She looked in Doujou’s direction, silently begging for help, but he scowled and made a dismissive gesture with one hand. Even Tedzuka was temporarily thrown off-balance.

“While you’re at it, could you bring us our lunch too?” Komaki’s voice followed in their wake, as Iku, half-willing, half-reluctant, was led out of the archives.

The moment the door closed, Shibasaki, returning to normal, let go of her arm. “Okay, let’s go.”

“...what happened to hyper-Shibasaki?”

“I had to, it was for Doujou. I can’t resist when he asks me to do something; I’m his biggest fan, you know,” she shrugged apathetically. “I see he’s still doting on you...”

“Excuse me? What do you mean?”



“He called me up and begged me, he said, when you bring down the files, will take Kasahara out to lunch while you’re at it? He said Tedzuka went at you, and you were almost crying? I could feel the crackles of tension in the air when I came in.”

The tears that she had fought back before Shibasaki arrived returned with a vengeance.

“Shibasakiiiiiiiiiii!”

She threw her arms around Shibasaki, who cried out acerbically, “Hey, whoa there! I thought you were going to pick me up and eat me for a second!”

“Thank you so much for coming! I know it’s all my fault, I know I’m just reaping what I sowed, but it was awful! I’ve never been so humiliated!”

“Like I said! I didn’t come for your sake! ...hmm, maybe he’s the type who likes a little imperfection in his inamoratae?” Shibasaki mused, lost in thought. After a time, she came back with, “Nope! I couldn’t do it! After God took the trouble to make me this beautiful, I couldn’t purposely bring myself down to your level!”

“I can’t believe you went there!” Iku laughed through her tears.

“Come on, let’s get over to the mess hall. It’d be awkward if Tedzuka were to come out now and see us.”

At Shibasaki’s urging, Iku followed quickly after her up the stairs.

“Well, if we’re going to play the blame game, the girl who didn’t bother to study up even though she knew she was hopeless at classifications is probably the most at fault here,” Shibasaki said, gesturing with her chopsticks. It was harsh criticism, but, Iku reflected, Shibasaki was just stating the situation. There was no malice in it, so it didn’t hurt much. *That’s one difference between her and Tedzuka.*

“Tedxuka has a pretty nasty way of saying things sometimes, doesn’t he.”

“Yeah, but he was right that I was at fault.” He was right; she was clueless and naïve. Iku could now imagine how irritating she must have been to Tedzuka—someone who never stopped working to improve, even though he was nearly peerless already.

“You know, there’s a difference between hearing the obvious and repeating it.”

“Stop patronizing me!”

Shibasaki recoiled suddenly. “Don’t shake your head while you’re slurping your noodles! You’re getting soup all over me!” After regaining her usual composure, she continued, “Well, but, at least you’re not full of yourself. I wouldn’t be comforting you if you were the type to say ‘Doesn’t he!? Isn’t it obnoxious!?’”

“...were you comforting me? I couldn’t tell. Shibasaki-ese is sure hard to understand.”

“On the contrary, it’s quite simple,” she replied demurely. *Well, it’s always from a twisted and perverse perspective, so I guess in a sense it’s easy to understand,* Iku ruminated.



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Iku finished her meal first, and while waiting for Shibasaki to finish hers, she broached the subject.

“Shibasaki. Will you teach me about library duties?”

*I don't want to slow anyone down anymore.* The one who would bear the brunt of the complaints about the three books that were sent back was the one in charge: Doujou. It would have made her feel better if he had lashed out at her like Tedzuka. His silence was harder to bear than his anger.

*He's always getting mad at me, why can't he do me a favor and get mad this time?*

“I thought it would come to this,” Shibasaki nodded smugly. “I can help you get a little better. Starting tonight, I'm going to put you through the wringer!”

“I owe you one!” she said gratefully, but Shibasaki was looking at something behind Iku and frowning. Intrigued, Iku turned around. The object of interest was a middle-aged man sitting two tables back.

“Who's that?”

“The acting library director.”

*That's him?* She took a last quick look and turned back. He had the kind of dull, ordinary appearance that was easily forgotten. There was talk that he was a problem for the library, but as Iku hadn't had any personal experience with him, he didn't pique her interest any more than that.

Doujou's reorganization did the trick. In the afternoon, there were no more embarrassing incidents of books being sent back. They were still busy, but the pace had quickened enough that during the lull in requests, they were able to gobble down the lunches that Iku had brought back.

Iku felt especially pathetic—their efficiency went *up* with her out of the picture—but that was the way her luck went.

Leaving the archives to go to the bathroom, she encountered Doujou eating on a bench in the hallway. She thought for a moment about thanking him for letting her leave for lunch, but she didn't think he had intended for her to know about it, so she decided not to speak on it.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, bowing. Doujou looked up at her in confusion. “For suggesting the reorganization,” she clarified. “I'll work hard to learn the classification system.”

“Okay. Good luck,” Doujou replied with his usual curtness. When she returned from the bathroom, he had already finished eating and returned to the archives.

As the seven o'clock closing time drew near, Iku had accumulated about thirty of the hundred books requested by other libraries.

“I can't believe you had six hours and couldn't even get the job half done.” Tedzuka



wasted no time in voicing his scorn. Iku had no room to reply and remained silent.

“Give me what you have left.” Doujou divided the rest of the printouts into four rough piles. He did it casually, but Iku didn’t think it was her imagination that the pile she was handed was smaller. He was probably trying to help her, but it only reinforced her feelings of ineptness to know that he thought she needed help.

Before everyone scattered, Iku asked, “What do we do with the ones we can’t find? There were a few books I couldn’t find no matter how hard I looked, so I put them aside. So we might have some unfindable books in the remaining printouts.”

“Since it was you who did the searching, I have my doubts about whether or not they were actually unfindable.” Iku glared at Tedzuka. As usual, he had no right to go so far, but since the theory that she couldn’t find the books due to her own incompetence had an unpleasant plausibility, she restrained herself to cursing him inside her head. *Why don’t you see if you can find them, asshole?*

“If we can’t find something, we call it a ‘missing book’ and return the request form to the counter. The regular library staff will investigate its absence,” Doujou answered.

Once again, they split up to search the archives. In the end, four books emerged as missing.

“I told you! See, there *were* missing books!” Iku crowed, and Tedzuka looked frustrated at her victory. In point of fact, the pile of printouts that Iku had put aside as unfindable had been a bit larger, but there was no reason to mention that.

“It’s nothing to be proud of, Kasahara. Wipe that smirk off your face. Missing books are no laughing matter for the library,” Doujou rebuked her at once. She reluctantly closed her mouth. *What the hell, at least let me get back at him for what he said earlier! I didn’t see you defending me,* she complained mentally—and then realized. The fact that neither Doujou nor Komaki had come to her defense meant that they found Tedzuka’s ridiculing credible. The shock hit her in the pit of her stomach and she slumped, crestfallen.

“Four is a lot, though. This is a bit alarming,” Komaki frowned, shaking his head.

“Is it really a lot?”

Komaki nodded at Iku’s question. “Especially since right before summer vacation started, there was an inventory.” While Iku and the others had been away for Task Force training, the Musashino First Library had closed for two weeks, and a large-scale spring cleaning and reorganization had taken place.

“It’s unthinkable that there would be so many missing books only a month afterwards...”

“Maybe they did a shoddy job at inventory. In any case, all we can do is follow the usual procedures and return the requests to the counter,” Doujou said, as he began to pack the books they had gathered into a container. His manner was so different from the





Improvement Special Agents she had encountered during training—well, obviously—that they were nearly incomparable, and Iku found herself irresistibly fascinated by his hands. His care for the books shone through in every action, every gesture. It made her feel warm inside. —*but that’s only if I look at his hands*, Iku qualified contrarily. She still hadn’t really forgiven him for giving credence to Tedzuka’s accusation.

*All right, time to pitch in.* Iku joined the packing with a will. *This doesn’t require any special knowledge—I won’t fall behind.*

Thus, up until they shipped the packages out, Iku managed to participate without slowing the other three down.

“Then, just today, there were four missing books. Instructor Doujou said that they might have done a half-assed job at inventory this year...”

Iku talked to Shibasaki about it after she returned to the dorm, in the middle of the promised lessons. The moment Shibasaki heard, she shook her head violently. “That’s impossible! Even if it’s Doujou who said it, that’s unpardonable! All of the divisions reviewed the procedures together, down to the archives! Are you saying we screwed up!?”

“Then why are there four books missing, just a month later?”

Shibasaki was silent for a long time, looking worried. Finally, she asked, “Are you sure it wasn’t because you were the one doing the looking?”

“Hell, not you too!” She was still hurting from Doujou and Komaki’s tacit acceptance of Tedzuka’s accusation. Now even Shibasaki doubted her as a matter of course. Iku swelled like a pufferfish in anger. “Yes, if you must know, there were books that I just couldn’t find! But these four, these were ones that even Tedzuka and the instructors looked for and didn’t find!”

“I see, then they really are missing, aren’t they.” Shibasaki’s unrepentant reply stung her even more.

“Dammit! Nobody thinks anything of pouring salt into my open wounds...!”

“Alas, respect is something you have to earn. You’re just not quite worthy of it yet.” Shibasaki frowned. “Even so, there shouldn’t be so many missing books just one month after the inventory.”

“That’s what Instructor Komaki said. He said it was very strange.”

“I wonder if people have been sloppy about reshelving. I’ll bring it up at the next meeting,” Shibasaki concluded, and went back to her lecture on the classification system. When she had finished, she produced an economy-sized bag of chocolate.

“Time to test what you’ve learned so far! For every question you get wrong, you have to eat a piece of chocolate.”

“Seriously!?”





Chapter 2: Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

It was already past eleven, and a chocolate binge right before bed did terrible things to Iku's skin and figure. It was a nasty, sadistic punishment, the sort of thing only another girl could have come up with.

"No, please! If I eat chocolate before bed, my skin breaks out like—"

"I know. Won't it aid your focus to know that there are there are consequences for being wrong?"

"Wait, wait, how many questions are there!?"

"Let's see..." Shibasaki took out a printout from their training days. Someone—perhaps even Shibasaki—had whited out the text in some places, leaving twenty or thirty blanks for Iku to fill in.

"You'd make me eat twenty pieces, you demon!?"

"Do you plan on getting them all wrong? If that's the case, I had better increase the number of questions tomorrow..."

"*Starting tonight, I'm going to put you through the wringer!*" Shibasaki hadn't been lying, not one bit.

Doujou's squad had taken charge of the archive until the new members—mainly Iku—learned all the duties involved. Since Iku was still unreliable in the field, they stuck to the arrangement from the first day: Iku in charge of requests from other libraries, and the others in charge of requests from their own patrons.

It was said that before the Media Improvement Act was passed, the archives hadn't been nearly so flooded with requests as it was now. However, nowadays, the archives were full of books that had otherwise been censored by the Media Improvement Committee, and the archives had been transformed into a library service as easy to use as a reference room.

Iku's grades in lecture had been abysmal all through her training period. Her performance the first day in the archives had been similarly abysmal. But within several days, she was finishing her assigned requests before closing time, and gradually found time to handle other duties, like reshelving.

...well, that was the good news.

"What is going on with her face? Some kind of skin disease?" Doujou asked Komaki, watching from a distance as Iku scurried around. Ever since they had begun their duties in the archives, large pimples had been appearing and disappearing from Iku's forehead and jaw. They had caught his eye because they looked extremely painful.

Komaki chuckled evilly. "Apparently it's a side effect of her special lessons."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Shibasaki-san is teaching her about library duties and the classification system, but every time she gets a question wrong, her punishment is a piece of chocolate. It seems



there's a direct link between her acne and eating chocolate before bed.”

Overcome with surprise, Doujou burst out laughing. —*what the hell, you two!* “I guess the real question is, how many is she getting wrong?”

“Right now, about ten a night on average. It'll be interesting to see when they disappear.”

A week after this conversation, Iku approached Doujou before they began their duties that day. She had a determined look in her eyes.

“Starting today, I'd like to join the rest of you in fulfilling requests from our patrons.”

Doujou's gaze automatically went to her face, having to look up little to do so. The marks of healing pimples still showed clearly on her forehead, but he didn't see any sign of new ones.

“You don't have to be force-fed chocolate anymore?”

“Hey! How did you—?” Iku stiffened in surprise, hiding her forehead.

“I heard it from Komaki.”

“Instructor Komaki has a big mouth!”

“I was the one who brought it up. I asked what was going on with your face.”

Looking a little shocked, Iku asked in a small voice, “Was it really that noticeable?”

“You were a sorry sight, enough so that I got a little worried.”

“Oh, how *embarrassing...*”

Her woebegone appearance suddenly made him want to laugh. “All right, you can start doing the requests from patrons. If you can't keep up, let me know, and we'll go back to how it was before.”

“Yes, sir!”

He could glimpse her resolve in the way she said it, like a battle cry. *She's like a shape memory alloy*, he thought suddenly. *Able to spring right back, even when she's been depressed and down on herself.*

Iku's performance, after she joined the others in taking care of patrons' requests, was still inferior to Tedzuka's, but it was sufficient to be useful. Anyway, it wasn't exactly fair to use Tedzuka as a basis for comparison.

“When are you planning on giving her the recognition she deserves?” he asked Tedzuka blandly.

Tedzuka's calm face instantly turned stubborn. “If she had done what she was supposed to do from the beginning, she wouldn't have had any trouble. But she didn't. I call that laziness, sir.” His expression said, *Why should I have to recognize that idiot?*

Tedzuka was right. He was smart, hard-working, and serious, and his arguments were always well-reasoned and sound. But—“What exactly does Kasahara have to do to please you?”



Chapter 2: Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

Tedzuka's stubborn face stiffened. He didn't look like he was going to relent anytime soon.

Looking steadily at Tedzuka, he made his case. Tedzuka had to be convinced thoroughly if it was to mean anything at all. "Reason is an honorable thing, but the man who uses reason as a weapon is not. Which are you?"

Tedzuka's face flushed. Not in shame. In rage.

He didn't speak to Doujou for the rest of the day.

★

"How very *odd*..."

Shibasaki frowned as she typed away at the terminal. The library was closed and her duties were finished for the day, but she had stayed in the office alone, doing a little overtime work.

She was calling up the data on the missing books, after hearing about them from Iku. It was still a surprise to learn that fifteen books had been logged as missing since the library-wide inventory. They included not only books from the archive, but some from the open access shelves as well. There had been a few missing books last year—those that hadn't been found during the inventory had been treated as lost—but since the Library Force's systems had been established, the Musashino First Library had installed detectors to prevent books that were not supposed to be loaned out from leaving the building, so the number of lost books each year was miniscule.

Which meant that it was unheard of for so many books to go missing just a month after the inventory.

"Once we have eliminated the possibility of a coincidence, we must assume a logical connection."

What was the connection between these fifteen books? She called up information on each book, one by one. Almost all of them were children's books, but there was no commonality in their titles or authors, or even their genres or target age groups.

*Hold on...*

Shibasaki's brow furrowed. Something about the titles was ringing a bell. It wasn't that they were all books she had read—she had only read a few of the fifteen. But Shibasaki's memory was telling her that there was some factor that linked all these seemingly unconnected books.

"Hmmm...what was it...I know there's *something* about them..."

As Shibasaki sat lost in thought, she heard the sound of a door closing in the hallway. It was the one facing the office—the door to the archive. The building was deserted and silent



as the grave, and every small noise resounded clearly. *I wonder if it's a guard*, she thought, standing. It was a little early for the night watch, but if they were locking the staff exits early too, she should let a guard know that she was still here.

However, the man she encountered in the hallway was not a Defense Force member.

“—Director Toba.”

It was the acting director of the library, Toba Toshio. His face froze in surprise upon meeting Shibasaki.

“Working overtime, are you? Are you alone?”

“...no, sir?” Shibasaki laughed nonchalantly. “There was another girl working late with me, but we were going to go home after getting dinner. She left to go buy it for me, so I’m just waiting for her. She should be back soon.”

She didn’t quite dare to ask Toba why *he* had stayed late.

“I see. You should hurry home soon,” Toba ordered, then hastily climbed the stairs.

And that was when Shibasaki remembered the link between all the missing books.

“Weren’t they all in the Board of Education’s Bulletin on Recommended Books?”

Along with lists of recommended reading, the bulletin included a lineup of “undesirable books.” It designated several for each grade level, from kindergarten to high school. She had a recent memory of the acting director grumbling about putting lending restrictions on those books. The other staff members, citing Article 31 of the Library Laws: “Libraries have the right to make materials freely available,” had quickly rejected the idea, but—

“I wonder...I really wonder...”

Shibasaki printed off a summary of the missing books and headed to the archive. Toba was unlikely to return, since she had told them that her friend would soon be back.

He probably didn’t want many people to know that he was visiting the archive at this hour.

That night, Tedzuka paid a visit to Komaki’s room. He was still brooding over the incident with Doujou at lunchtime. Library Officers Second Class and above had rooms to themselves, so there was none of the awkwardness or restraint of a public setting. Komaki invited Tedzuka in, then opened the tiny refrigerator.

“Want something to drink? I’ve basically got beer.”

“Yes, thank you, sir.” He took the can and popped it open, then took a gulp. He needed some liquid courage for this conversation. “About Librarian First Class Kasahara, sir.”

“Oh, right down to business, I see!”

Tedzuka ignored Komaki’s interruption and said his piece in one breath. “Is it necessary for me to accept her?”

“*What exactly does Kasahara have to do to please you?*” Tedzuka could only interpret



Doujou's words as a demand to accept Kasahara Iku.

Komaki didn't answer right away, appearing deep in thought. Finally he raised his head, looking puzzled. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand the intent of your question." He opened his mouth, thinking to discuss Tedzuka's exchange with Doujou, when a new angle presented itself. "...Are you saying that if Doujou or I ordered you to accept her, you would?"

Tedzuka lost the ability to answer. Hearing Komaki state so precisely the intent of his question made it sound so childish.

"It wouldn't be right for me to give you an order about something like that. Besides, the definition of 'accept' is pretty vague." Komaki was also one who could get right down to business. "It's clear to me that you don't like her, but frankly, Tedzuka, you can still work with people you hate. Work goes easier if you get along with your coworkers, but it's not like you *can't* work except with people you like. Unless your feelings are interfering with your effectiveness, I see no reason why your feelings about Kasahara-san need to change. It's possible to rely on a teammate's abilities without actually liking them very much."

Komaki's unexpected observations actually got through to Tedzuka. His impression had been that the gentle Komaki was helping Doujou try to make the two of them get along. To learn the truth drained him of his resentment and left him feeling bitterly ashamed. He realized that he had basically been asking for an order to accept Kasahara Iku emotionally, which made him feel even more childish.

Komaki gave a sudden dry laugh. "I'm not an unconditionally nice guy, you know. I'm rather fond of a well-reasoned argument."

Hearing one of his worries discussed so lightly made Tedzuka hide his face. The things Komaki had told him rang loudly in his ears, with the additional provision that it wasn't nice to argue and rationalize.

Tedzuka was struck with the sudden insight that the man who used reason honorably was probably a lot like Komaki.

"No one can force you to open up to Kasahara-san, Tedzuka, just as no one can force her to open up to you. You'd probably be disturbed if we tried, right?"

What was disturbing Tedzuka was the difference between his opinion of Kasahara Iku and his superiors'. He didn't understand why his superior officers thought highly of her. It frustrated and irritated him when he couldn't understand the decisions of talented people.

"We don't judge Kasahara-san based on her skill. Her clerical skills especially are dreadful—she's a bungler who couldn't organize her way out of a wet paper bag. You're already better than she'll ever be."

*Then WHY?*, he protested internally. Komaki laughed.

"But she's so entertaining! Rash and hot-blooded. It reminds me of Doujou; that's why



the commander and I like her.”

“How the hell could that girl remind you of...”

“Oh, she does. I know you’re an admirer of Doujou...” Tedzuka was startled by this evidence of his own complete transparency. His superiors were each excellent in their own way, but Tedzuka found Doujou a perfect exemplar who was easy to understand and emulate, and in that way was the ideal superior officer. That was why he was so annoyed with Iku, who couldn’t seem to do anything except butt heads with him. “From your perspective, Doujou must look calm and decisive—something like that, right? But in essentials he’s much more like Kasahara-san than he’s like you. You’ve probably heard about the Bear-Killer incident, for example.”

“So, he defends her because they’re alike?” he asked curiously, before he could help himself.

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple, for Doujou,” Komaki replied. Tedzuka was jealous of the way he spoke so knowingly of Doujou. “It’s not a flattering resemblance, which embarrasses him and makes him uncomfortable, among other difficulties. He’s going through a lot of pain to find his balance. However, if Doujou said something to you about Kasahara-san, it’s not because he’s favoring her. It’s because you needed to hear it. I believe in his ability to maintain fairness in these situations.”

Part of Komaki’s greatness lay in the ability to deliver statements like that without affectation. Tedzuka suddenly remembered his beer and brought it to his lips. It had grown warm from his hands, and no longer felt refreshing going down his throat.

“Getting back to the original topic, I personally feel that there are things you stand to gain from Kasahara-san. However, it’s completely up to you whether you try for them or not.”

“...what do you think would happen to me if I did gain them?”

“I think you’d become a more entertaining person.”

Tedzuka was mystified—was there any benefit to such a thing? He couldn’t tell from Komaki’s expression if his superior was joking or serious.

Suddenly, a knock sounded. When Komaki responded, the door opened, and who should poke his head in, but Doujou. Tedzuka felt momentarily awkward and didn’t know where to look, but Doujou merely said, “Oh, there you are.” Well, *he* had the advantage of a clean conscience.

“Get over to the conference room, you two.”

“A meeting, now? We’ve already broken out the booze.”

“You’ve only got one empty can. Tedzuka, you looks fine too. I’ll see you there.”

Doujou pulled the door closed without waiting for a reply. Komaki sighed and stood up, finishing off the rest of his beer, and Tedzuka followed suit.



Chapter 2: Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

Gathered in a conference room in the co-ed section of the dorm were Doujou's squad of four, as well as Genda and Shibasaki. Shibasaki had been the one to call the meeting, via Iku. Iku felt vaguely unsettled in her role as a go-between. Shibasaki had asked for her help, but hadn't said why.

"Something you wanted to report informally, Librarian First Class Shibasaki?"

Taking her cue from Genda, Shibasaki nodded. "It's a serious matter, so I wanted the judgment of high-ranking officers."

"I have an objection," Tedzuka interjected, in his too-serious tone. "Librarian First Class Shibasaki, you're in Library Administration. Shouldn't you be reporting this to your superiors there?"

"You're even more dogmatic than I'd heard," Shibasaki snorted. "Perhaps you'd understand if I put it this way: there's a strong possibility that my information might be distorted under pressure if I try to go through the usual channels to the brass of Library Administration. I have this convenient connection—" she thumped Iku on the shoulder "—and I'll use any effective bypass I can. Anyway, isn't the Library Task Force supposed to be the commando unit of the organization?"

Tedzuka subsided reluctantly. Iku gazed at Shibasaki with something like gratitude. She was an eloquent woman, but who would have thought that she could shut Tedzuka up so efficiently?

"So, what is this information that might be distorted under pressure?" Genda pressed.

"There is a possibility that the acting library director is committing acts that violate Article 31 of the Library Laws."

Everyone turned serious after that.

She told them about the rash of missing books just a month after the inventory, and how all fifteen had been branded "undesirable books" by the Board of Education. And how the acting director had been advocating lending restrictions on them.

"And then there's this." Shibasaki picked up a paper bag from the table. Inside was a collection of books, all with plastic library covers. "After the acting director left the archive, I searched the closed access shelves and found these—all fifteen missing books."

"You've got eighteen here. What are the other three?" Komaki asked. He was a fast counter.

"Just in case, I also looked up the reserve copies of the 'undesirable books.' Even though according to the records they had never been checked out, they weren't in their proper locations and were listed as missing. I found them in the closed access shelves too, so I brought them along." As usual, Shibasaki had left no holes in her investigation.

"...so basically, the acting director was hiding books!?" Iku reacted with an outraged shout.





Chapter 2: Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

“This is certainly a gray area...” Genda reacted with a grave murmur.

“Gray! What do you mean, ‘gray’? It’s pitch-black! A clear violation of Article 31!” Iku was shouting again.

“Cool it,” Doujou broke in. “It’s not like we have any proof. Anyway, in the first place, Articles 30 and 31 are meant to secure the rights of the library against outsiders, not our own people. If someone outside the library tries to infringe on our rights, they give us the authority to resist, but there aren’t any penalties for *not* enforcing them.”

Komaki put in a word. “It’s a clever strategy. Even if we could prove the acting director did it, it would be hard to establish criminal intent. He could just say he made a mistake in reshelving them. It hasn’t been long since he took up the job, anyway.”

Tedzuka chimed in. “Yes, the weakness of Section Four of the Library Laws is its lack of provisions for internal investigation.”

“Really?” Iku burst out, then winced. *Aw, dammit.* She thought more sarcasm would be forthcoming from Tedzuka, but he let it go with a quick scowl.

“Not to mention the problem of the acting director’s background.” No one asked Genda what he meant, though as Iku looked around she saw Doujou open his mouth. “He has ties to the faction that opposes the Library Force. If we raise a stink without any proof, it’ll just come back to bite us in the ass. Shibasaki was right not to make an issue of this with Library Administration.

“Let me deal with this matter for the time being. I’ll report it to the Base Commander. In the meantime, return the books Shibasaki found to their appropriate places, and later we can report to Library Administration that Doujou’s squad found them. It’ll be a diversion at that point, if nothing else.” Genda stood. “One more thing. Keep this matter among the six of us for now. Dismissed!”

A few days later, Acting Director Toba received a notification from the Library Task Force. It informed him that there had been many more missing books this year than average, and that the missing books had been discovered by the Task Force. The cause was thought to be carelessness in reshelving, and he was advised to urge caution as necessary among the staff.

Shibasaki reported that he took this advice, telling them all during morning assembly that he had heard of shelving mistakes, and warning them to be careful.

He didn’t make any reference to missing books, so it looked like the diversion had worked. The parties involved were just breathing a sigh of relief—when the Task Force had the rug pulled completely out from under them.

★



Chapter 2: Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

“Shibasaki-kun, would you deliver our copies of the Board of Education’s ‘undesirable books’ to the director’s office? All the ones that aren’t lent out, even the reserve copies.” The request came from the assistant director, just as they were nearing closing time.

“Did something happen?” she asked, very curious. Had he found out about the acting director hiding books?

“No, some visitors from the Board of Education are coming to meet with the acting director. They want to hear why we’re not putting lending restrictions on their ‘undesirable books,’ and they want them on hand while we’re talking. I’ll be present as well.” The assistant director laughed bitterly. “If the Board got him alone, there’s no telling what he might agree to.” The assistant director was only forty or so, ten years younger than the acting director, but from his tone he might as well have been talking about an incompetent subordinate.

“Oh? Those kind of meetings aren’t usually so late in the day.” Visits from all kinds of boards and committees were common, but they usually ended in the early evening. It was rare for one to begin so late, near the library’s seven o’clock closing time. “Are you sure you need the reserve copies as well? If they’re just going to reference them during the conversation, one copy should be plenty.”

“No, they said they want to see the reserve copies too. Sorry, I know it’s a hassle, but could you...?”

The director’s office was on the fourth floor, two floors above the reference room. Of course it would take a bit of time, but, “I can take the elevator. It won’t be so bad. I’ll bring them right away.”

The director left Shibasaki with a look of gratitude as he climbed the stairs.

It was just as Shibasaki had delivered the books to the director’s office, right before closing time. The sound of an emergency klaxon echoed through the building, followed by urgent announcement over the PA system.

*“Reports from sentries indicate the movement of the Improvement Special Agency troops in the vicinity of the library! All hands are to be put on high alert! All patrons remaining in the building are to evacuate immediately!”*

It was the first Improvement Special Agency raid Shibasaki had experienced since she had started her duties in the library. There had been several before, but they mostly occurred in the middle of the night, so she had never been present for one.

Understandably, she froze for a moment, her mind a blank, until her superior officer’s bellow of “Lock the computer terminals!” brought her back to her senses. Locking all terminals where one could search the library’s catalog was the highest-priority defense measure of the library staff. The terminals cached the data they fetched from the database for a certain length of time, so they couldn’t keep information from falling into the wrong



hands just by shutting down the main server.

Shibasaki hammered a password into the computer she was using. In times of crisis, a staff member set an arbitrary password on the computer he or she used. It was feared that if they were set ahead of time, the password would be leaked. Shibasaki promptly entered her birthdate, backwards.

“I’m going to seal off the archive!” someone shouted, running downstairs. Shibasaki rushed to lock the public computers. *I must remember which ones I lock...* She entered her family’s birthdates, backwards, starting with her father’s.

Just as her superior officer’s order of “Everyone, get out now!” reached her, she realized it. The assistant director—who in times like this should be giving out the orders—was not present.

She was shouting before she had finished the thought. “The Board of Education is here, in a meeting in the director’s office!”

“The assistant director will get them out safely! Now *move!*” Following his orders, she began to run. Something was still niggling at the back of her mind, but she didn’t have the time to figure out what it was. Her destination was a shelter on the second floor. It was against the rules of war to attack a shelter.

Skirmishes had already broken out at the front and rear entrances. The sound of gunfire was everywhere. All of the building’s windows and panels were bulletproof glass, in preparation for this very situation; still, it took a brave person to walk around inside. Shibasaki’s grades in combat training hadn’t been very good, and she knew she couldn’t handle violence very well.

She caught a sudden glimpse of the courtyard from the connecting corridor, and saw several Improvement troops climbing the fire escape stairs. *They usually go after the reference room or the archive, and those are on the first floor and in the basement. Why are they—*and then the entire mystery unraveled itself.

“Shibasaki! Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’ll be right back!” Shibasaki broke free and ran for the emergency klaxon. Next to each klaxon was an intercom that was connected to the PA system.

She herself had delivered the Board of Education’s “problem books” to the director’s office. During the sudden attack, there probably hadn’t been time to take the books with them to shelter, so they were probably still there, in the director’s office. It was highly likely that among those “problem books” were also those that the Improvement Committee had targeted for censorship. *The Board of Education and the Improvement Committee must have colluded in this.* The Board of Education would have a meeting where the books were needed for “reference,” and leave them behind during the attack to be thoroughly seized by the Improvement Special Agency. Now she understood why they had asked for even



the reserve copies. It was so the Special Agency could collect every last one of the problem books.

Shibasaki reached the emergency klaxon and picked up the intercom. Patching in to the PA system, she shouted, “This is the administration division, the enemy’s target is the director’s office!” She hung up and at last fled to the safety of the shelter.

Iku, who had been running to respond to the emergency call to arms, skidded to a halt and stared up at the PA speaker. *That was Shibasaki’s voice.*

Her body started moving before her mind had caught up. She opened a nearby window, jumped out into the courtyard, and headed for the fire escape. *I can probably get up to the director’s office that way.*

“Hey!” Tedzuka rebuked her. “That’s not what our orders were!” Doujou had ordered them to join up with the group defending the main entrance. They may have been Task Force members, but they were still fairly new, and they were assigned to a fairly well-fortified area.

“Shibasaki just said to go to the director’s office!”

“Of all the idiotic...whose orders do you think take priority! A staff librarian’s, or Library Officer Doujou’s?”

“Right now, Shibasaki’s! She wouldn’t say something like that if she didn’t mean it!”

“You don’t have any proof that she’s right!”

“I know Shibasaki! That’s my proof!” Iku cut off the conversation there and ran for the fire escape. Behind her she heard Tedzuka jump out the window, cursing.

“You don’t have to come with me!” she yelled when he caught up with her.

“It would have been even worse if I had just let you go off on your own!” Tedzuka yelled back.

Still running, Tedzuka fumbled for the radio. “This is Librarian Tedzuka calling Library Officer Doujou! Based on information we received from a staff member, we will *not* be proceeding to our assigned posts! We’re going to the director’s office instead!”

They ran up the fire escape and reached the emergency doors. Tedzuka pulled out his handgun. “Open it,” he told her. He was the more skilled, so it was the right decision. Iku opened the door, and Tedzuka leapt in. He held his gun ready, but there was no ambush.

When they reached the director’s office, the door swung out. They had run smack into the enemy. There were four of them—and they had more combat experience. They shot without hesitation, and while Tedzuka and Iku leapt for cover, the enemy made their getaway, heading for the stairs.

But the sounds of gunfire immediately echoed from the stairwell. A Defense Force squad had been lying in wait downstairs, and engaged the fugitives in a firefight. Another



unit who had heeded Shibasaki's warning, perhaps.

One Improvement troop member, who was wearing a backpack, retreated up the stairs. Should they chase him, or attack the remaining troops from behind?

*"Tedzuka, Kasahara! Come in! Are you up there?"*

While replying to Doujou's transmission, Iku rose on her tiptoes and peered over the melee. It seemed that the squad fighting the enemy below was Doujou's. He had brought his subordinates backup, after they decided to disregard his orders and change their destination. Doujou was a strict and demanding superior, but an excellent one, and he had responded to the situation perfectly.

*"Go after the one who ran! He's trying to escape with the books!"*

"We'll take the fire escape to the roof and cut him off there!" Tedzuka yelled, already breaking into a run.

"Won't he take the fire escape down from the fifth floor? We'll miss him!"

"No, the timing works out! We'll catch him for sure! Anyway, he had a climbing rope tied to his backpack. If he's going to rappel down, it would be faster from the roof!"

Tedzuka was correct. They didn't meet him on the fire escape. When they reached the roof, they found the Improvement trooper bending down next to the railing. He quickly looked up. The end of his climbing rope was tied to the handrail.

This time Tedzuka didn't hesitate. A shot rang out, and the Improvement trooper crumpled as if his feet had been swept out from under him. Nothing less than the best from His Majesty the honor student. But the Improvement trooper wasn't ready to give up.

"—No!"

Iku ran over, but she was too late. The enemy had hefted the backpack and flung it over the railing. "You *bastard!*" She took him down with one blow, then yanked his hands behind his back and handcuffed him. She had learned well from her blunder during training.

In despair, they looked down over the railing. The backpack had fallen almost directly below, in the bushes of the yard. Tedzuka radioed in to Doujou, informing him of the situation and requesting that he recover the books.

Then suddenly there was a burst of gunfire. It was coming from below. Quickly ducking down, they peeked down at the ground. The guns were silent, and the Improvement troops on the ground were slowly moving to collect the backpack. Doujou's team wouldn't make it in time.

"I'm going down. Cover me, Tedzuka."

"Like hell you are!" Tedzuka shouted. "You'll be a sitting duck. If anyone's going, it should be me."

"Even though you're afraid of heights!?"

Tedzuka froze for one startled second after Iku's assertion, but came back quickly with a



denial. “I don’t need concern from someone like you! I’ll go! As if I could expose a woman to that kind of danger!”

“Enough already! God, it’s like you’re not satisfied unless you’re the best at everything! ‘Put the right person in the right place’—it’s the golden rule of our penniless Force!” Shamelessly stealing Komaki’s lines, she pulled out her gun and spare rounds of ammunition, and handed them over to Tedzuka. “I can’t shoot worth a damn anyway, so I’ll leave these to you. I’ll be on the ground before you run out of bullets. After I grab the backpack, I’ll roll to the right, so watch out. Good luck, I’m counting on you.”

Tedzuka didn’t argue any further, and collected another gun from the fallen Improvement agent. Iku checked that his climbing rope was tied tightly. He might be an enemy, but he tied a respectable knot. She only had shooting gloves, but they should be durable enough.

Tedzuka gave her the count. “One, two, and three!” On “three,” she threw herself over the railing, and by the time she heard the first gunshots, she had already passed by one set of windows.

She let three sets of windows go by, barely braking at all, then began to decelerate. She was still moving fast when she plunged into the bushes, but landed without injury. She looked for the backpack as she found her balance, and the second she had it she hurled herself to the right, just as she had told Tedzuka she would.

She made it to her goal, the shadows under a copse of trees, where she hid herself and caught her breath. Her heart wouldn’t stop hammering in her chest, and she felt like it was going to give out at any second.

“What now? I didn’t think this far ahead...”

She couldn’t hear gunfire from the roof anymore; it looked as though Tedzuka had run out of ammunition.

“Damn it, looks like I’ll have to make another run for it!” Iku shouldered the backpack, rose to a crouch, and—

“What the hell kind of idiot are you!? Stay where you are!” She heard a familiar bellow from the building nearby. Immediately a Defense Force squad rushed out one of the exits, fanning out through the yard, and began to engage the enemy. There was a brief, terrible clamor of gunfire, and then the Improvement Special Agency retreated, relinquishing their objective.

Iku was resting and waiting for the all-clear when she was approached by Doujou. She stood, thinking he had some words of praise and gratitude to give her, when he heaved a wretched sigh in her direction. “Do something about your habit of using your spinal cord to think things through—give them a chance to get as far as your brain before you make decisions.”





“That’s a pretty offensive way to start a conversation, sir!”

“I’m begging you!” Doujou shouted, grabbing Iku’s shoulders. “When you’re surrounded by fire, with no backup, don’t even think about trying to break through! Tedzuka radioed us to come collect the books, so at least consider the fact that I’d be here soon!”

Iku’s retort died in her throat in the face of his fierce expression. *Yikes, I really got him mad. But being really mad means I basically got him really—worried.* She flinched away from that knowledge.

“...I’m sorry, sir.” Iku looked Doujou right in the eye. “I completely forgot you’d be coming.”

“...now who’s being offensive!?”

“What? What do you mean! I was sincerely trying to apologize!”

Her sincere apology backfired, and she got earful in return. All around them, the cleanup crew tittered as they went about their business. Iku shrank in mortification. She tried fighting back, she tried acting meek, but it didn’t matter—*damn but he’s a hard man to deal with.*

Just as she was thinking, *Come on, give it a rest already!*, Doujou’s lecture ended. His face still bore its usual sour expression, though, as he spoke again. “...well, all the same, your decision to go to the director’s office was first-rate.”

His face was stern but his words were kind; Iku wasn’t sure how to take them. She decided on a blank expression. “I ignored your orders, though...”

“If you two had gone to defend the main entrance, you wouldn’t have had any effect on the outcome of the raid. Your decision shows flexibility, and it got results. You managed to save the books, and that’s what matters.”

Another Force member called over to Doujou, and as he stood to leave, he left her an order. “Take the books back to the reference room. The Admin division has probably started cleanup there by now. While you’re there, see if you can talk to Shibasaki. I want to hear her story.” He probably wanted to know the basis for her announcement. It would need to go in his after-action report, to account for Iku and Tedzuka’s activities.

She went to the reference room and returned the rescued books, and during the conversation with Shibasaki, asked for news about the aftermath of the raid.

In the end, their side had sustained only light injuries. The Improvement agent whom Tedzuka had shot had been severely wounded, but an ambulance had been called to take him to a hospital, where the Improvement Special Agency could pick him up.

When Iku left the reference room, she found Tedzuka waiting for her. *I thought he’d be long gone by now, back to the staging room to turn in his equipment,* she thought dubiously. They exchanged lukewarm greetings and headed back to the base together. On the way, a frown deepened on Tedzuka’s face, until it became positively frightening.





Chapter 2: Libraries have the right to make materials freely available.

“...okay, what are you glaring at? Are you still pissed off at me for something?” Iku asked, thinking he was still brooding over the way she had overruled him on the roof.

Tedzuka stopped suddenly. “I...have a proposal,” he said abruptly. Iku shot him a dubious look. He continued resolutely. “Would you like to go out with me?”

“.....what?”

Iku’s brow furrowed. Was he making fun of her? Had he gone insane? But it seemed that this was an actual, earnest proposal. God help them both.



## Chapter 3

Libraries protect the privacy of their users.

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By the time Iku and Shibasaki had finished their cleanup duties after the Improvement Special Agency raid and returned to the dorm, it was after ten o'clock at night. They could use the showers any time night or day, but the mess hall had long since closed, so their dinner consisted of provisions they had acquired at a convenience store on the way home.

"I can't believe this is our post-combat meal. Isn't it just too pathetic?" Iku grumbled, opening a package of instant miso soup.

"Could you open my miso too? I'm going to the kitchenette to fill this." Shibasaki picked up the electric kettle and left the room.

Iku was looking through Shibasaki's shopping bag when her phone rang. It was from Doujou. Iku was puzzled—they had only parted a short time ago, following an after-action meeting. What could he have to say now?

"Hello?"

*"Do you have access to a TV? Turn on one of the commercial news channels."*

Iku shook her head in confusion at the sudden order. And why had he specified a commercial channel? "Commercial? Not NHK?"

*"In a case like this, the more sensationalist the coverage, the better."* Doujou named several channels that fit the bill, then hung up quickly. The curt conversation was Doujou all over.

For now, she turned on the TV. Every news show she flipped to was discussing the same case.

*"...a suspect was arrested in connection with the serial murders that have plagued the streets of..."*

*"...suspect is a high school student from Suginami City..."*

*"...a glimpse into the mind of a troubled youth..."*

The case had been in the news since the beginning of spring. The serial killer randomly targeted young women, mainly, and his bizarre, thrill-seeking methods hinted at an abnormal personality. All the TV stations had spent the early spring arguing and discussing his profile, but the spring recruits had missed most of the analysis, worn out as they were from their training regime.

"Oh, so they caught him!" Shibasaki had returned. She plugged the kettle in and set it to 'keep warm.' "Hey, you don't usually turn on the TV as soon as you get home."

"Yeah, but for some reason Instructor Doujou called me and told me to watch it."

"What—you got a call from Doujou!? I wish he had called me!" As usual, it was impossible to tell how serious Shibasaki was being. Iku mentally shook her head in puzzlement, and poured hot water into her miso soup cup.

The young suspect's bedroom was being shown on the TV. As the camera panned



almost lovingly over the computer and bookshelf, they spotted a familiar title among the row of books.

Shibasaki nodded. “Now I see why he told you to watch.”

It was a work of horror, on the Board of Education’s list of “undesirable books” for high school students, as well as a target for censorship by the Media Improvement Committee, as they had confirmed after the raid. The reason given for its censorship was “depiction of extreme cruelty.”

Shibasaki murmured wearily, “The Board of Education is sure in a rush.” When these sort of incidents happened, the public usually wanted to blame it on published media, so the Board of Education feared a backlash if they didn’t have counter-measures against books that were likely to lead to criminal behavior.

“If horror really caused the number of murderers to go up, Jason would be strolling around Tokyo on Friday the 13th.” Iku was referring to a horror movie series that had undergone a revival in the area in the last few years. She had never heard it said that the number of bizarre murders had increased at the beginning of the boom.

“If we’re going to say that published media cultivates criminals, then all men, young and old, are potential sex offenders. Pornographic movies and books contain a whole parade of perversions, from rape to obedience training. If we say that people commit crimes in imitation of media, then the very first thing we should be doing is giving all women a license to carry firearms.”

“Sh-Shibasaki. You’re taking this a little too far...” Iku found she was blushing. Sometimes Shibasaki’s way of speaking was a little too explicit for her.

“Oh, dear, I’m sorry,” Shibasaki said, not sounding very sorry at all. “Anyway, in the end, people get nervous unless they can find something to blame for things like this. ‘It’s all because of this book that he became so twisted.’ ‘This movie influenced him to commit crimes.’ If we find a reason for the crime, and take it away, those in charge of children can rest easier. It’s not that I don’t understand their feelings, but... A kid who likes to read, yet only reads the ‘quality’ books that parents and schools recommend, is too much of a goody two-shoes, and I’d almost be more scared of her.” Iku was inclined to agree. It wasn’t even that the ‘quality’ books were that bad.

However, whenever incidents like this happened, the movement to justify censorship gained momentum, so they were a headache for the library and others connected to media.

“But the timing is just too good to be a coincidence. The same day this news gets out, the Board of Education plots censorship? It’s like they knew ahead of time that this boy owned some of their ‘problem books.’”

“The Board of Education has connections in all manner of places. There are several



Chapter 3: Libraries protect the privacy of their users.

ways they could have come by the information—the public safety commission, the news organizations...they have strong ties in the Tokyo Assembly as well...”

Suddenly Shibasaki fell silent, listening intently to the broadcast. The report was summarizing on the boy’s personal history, informing the audience that his father was the principal of a local public high school.

“Aha!” Iku and Shibasaki crowed in perfect unison. When son of one of their own was the culprit, the Board of Education probably wanted to whitewash his surrounding circumstances as much as possible.

“By the way, what are they going to do to the acting director?” At the meeting the six of them had held earlier, they had only gotten as far as deciding to report to the base commander and await his judgement.

“You’re pretty slow on the uptake,” Shibasaki observed, surprised. Though, as far as Iku was concerned, her colleagues were too quick on the uptake. There were often times where everyone would catch what was going on except for Iku. “They probably won’t be able to do anything. Just like the incident before, we have no proof. On top of that, we don’t even have proof that the Board of Education and the Media Improvement Committee were working together.”

It was not illegal per se for the Media Improvement Committee to coordinate with other administrative agencies, but such partnerships were seldom officially made public. An inquiry on the subject would probably go unanswered. If indeed the Board of Education had shady dealings with the Media Improvement Committee, it would be a waste of time to seek official confirmation.

“Dammit! This is torture!” Even if Section Four of the Library Laws had no provisions for internal investigation, to have someone from the Library voluntarily cooperate with the Improvement Committee’s censorship was a serious issue that undermined the very philosophy and integrity of the Library. If the acting director’s complicity could be proven, it was possible that the Kantou Library Force could force his dismissal, but they were currently keeping their heads firmly in the sand.

“It’s possible that the Board of Education didn’t even let the acting director in on their whole plan.”

“*There’s a theory that that’s exactly why they stuck us with him,*” Shibasaki had commented, the last time Iku had criticized the acting director’s weakness in the face of power. A weak-willed man who allowed himself to be used without asking questions was a particularly practical pawn.

“You still don’t know when the real director will come back?”

“He doesn’t seem to be doing well after his operation. ‘Complications’ or something like that.”



Chapter 3: Libraries protect the privacy of their users.

“Man, sounds like it’s gonna be a while. I hope he’ll be okay.”

As Iku frowned worriedly, Shibasaki changed the subject. “Oh, by the way, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

Iku stiffened abruptly. She had made the request during their free time before the meeting, but now that it came down to it, she began to shake.

*I can’t imagine that this is anything other than a joke—I mean seriously, Tedzuka asking me out?*

“...he did? Is this some new way to bully you?”

*Wah, there was another explanation besides a joke. And I like this one even less!* Iku couldn’t reject Shibasaki’s suggestion with any conviction.

“I don’t know...but he looked more or less serious about it...” Though she could well imagine him bullying her seriously. “But that’s just impossible! Not to brag, but I have a phenomenal amount of confidence that he hates me, but not one iota of confidence that he *likes* me!”

For no reason she could fathom, he had been hostile to her since the first time they met—his hatred was the only thing that was clear. How could that possibly be interpreted as an overture of friendship?

There were hints that Tedzuka had begun to change his mind about her, as she reviewed her memories of their interaction since they had first met, but, “Impossible!” She tore at her hair as she remembered. “He told me that useless people shouldn’t be allowed to talk!”

“Wow, he went that far!? He’s a little ball of elitism, isn’t he! I could never say something like that,” Shibasaki said, looking almost impressed. “Well, in some sense at least, you can say that he couldn’t get you out of his head.” Shibasaki laughed at Iku’s dubious expression. “Passion isn’t something confined to affairs of the heart. Whether it’s animosity or rivalry, passion is passion.”

Indeed, Iku could much more readily ascribe those passions to him than more amorous ones.

“Tedsuka really doesn’t have that much of an attitude problem with any of our other peers. I’ve never heard that he’s particularly close to anyone, but he gets along reasonably well with everyone. It’s another area in which he excels, being himself without making enemies.”

Iku, listening, thought that he slightly resembled Shibasaki in that way.

“Putting it another way, he doesn’t really notice most other people. He doesn’t seem the type to make friends or be sociable at work, and it feels like there’s an element of practicality to it. I think he knows that he’s an easy target for jealousy.”

“You mean because he’s good at everything?”



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“Oh, you didn’t know? No, because his father is the president of the Library Association.”

The Library Association had expanded radically since the passing of the Media Improvement Act, and now it was a consultative body for libraries of all kinds throughout Japan. Though it was a corporation, it had a strong influence over the administration of the Library Force. As an organization that predated World War II, it played an indispensable part in the Library’s history.

“Anyway, for someone who goes about his life so practically to hate you with such a passion must mean that he’s intensely aware of you, more so than he is of any of his peers.”

“I don’t remember doing anything that would piss off that blue-blooded elite!”

“Why the hell is an idiot like her in the Task Force with me?” Shibasaki boomed in a low, masculine voice. Iku gulped in surprise. “...don’t you get the impression that he’s thinking something like that?”

As a theory of Tedzuka’s position, it had a certain plausibility.

“He’s a perfectionist, and he’s working for the Library, where he can’t get away from his father’s influence. He must have set his sights on the Task Force from the beginning. If he was selected from among the recruits, it would suffice as proof that he was talented enough to make it on his own, without his father’s assistance.”

Iku suddenly became intensely interested in the reason Tedzuka had pursued a library career, where he could never escape from his father’s presence. At the very least, he probably wasn’t chasing a “prince” like Iku, or some other frivolous reason.

“Just as he had finally achieved entrance into the great Library Task Force, proving his own worth once and for all, who should be chosen alongside him, but...you. ...Wow,” Shibasaki’s expression took on a commiserative cast, “now that I imagine it from Tedzuka’s perspective, it must have been horrible.”

“Dammit, as much as I hate to admit it, you’re right. Dammit! Fine, fine, I get why Tedzuka hates me now, let’s move on.” *You sadist*, she added silently. “How in the hell did he go from hating me to asking me out?”

“Oh, you know, hate can turn to love before you know it.”

“Are you serious? Do you seriously believe that? Have you stopped flying your ‘Brain Power’ flag?”

“Well, I don’t pretend to understand other people’s love affairs.” Shibasaki’s tone was light, but the phrase “love affair” hit Iku like a punch to the gut. *It’ll be a cold day in hell before you could apply that phrase to me and that bastard!* “So anyway, what did you tell him?”

“...‘gimme a few days to think about it,’” Iku mumbled, embarrassed.

“Wimp,” Shibasaki scoffed.





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“But I didn’t know what to say!” Iku protested. “Is it okay just to say ‘I’m sorry’ when you’re rejecting someone? Or do you have to give them a reason? I’ve always done the asking, so I’m an expert at getting rejected, but I’ve never had someone else ask *me!*”

“Then you should have firsthand knowledge of plenty of ways to get rejected! Think about what people have said to you, and adapt them into something appropriate!”

“But it was always a variation on ‘I don’t know how I feel about going out with a girl who’s taller than me’! How am I supposed to adapt that, ‘I don’t know how I feel about going out with a guy who’s taller than me’!? That’d sound ridiculous!”

“If you get rejected just because of your height, every single time, your taste in men leaves a lot to be desired.”

“But until middle school, there were never any boys who were taller than me!”

“Wait, so, putting two and two together—your last romantic experience was in middle school?”

“What if it was?”

“Wow! I thought your species was extinct!”

*You’re the weird one, getting all excited about it!* Iku thought sullenly.

“So was it that you didn’t ever have anyone to go out with?” The question took Iku unawares, and Shibasaki pressed her advantage. “Well, if he really wants to go out with you, there’s certainly room to consider it. He’s a little too sincere and literal-minded, but that means he’d probably take your relationship seriously. He’s not bad-looking—and he’s even taller than you! If you went out with him, you might find out he’s more interesting than he looks.”

Leaving aside the fact that it was *Tedzuka* they were talking about, and just looking at the facts, he didn’t sound so bad, eerily enough.

“But...but...” She was a little confused and her words were halting, but she persevered. “I don’t think you should decide whether or not to go out with someone intellectually...I don’t know, I think it’s better if it’s someone you actually like...”

“A virgin! We have a virgin here, sergeant!”

“Shut up! Leave me alone!” she shouted, her cheeks burning. She knew she prone to romanticism, precisely because of her lack of experience. Otherwise, she would never have ended up referring to the Library Officer she met in high school as her “prince”—in front of Doujou, of all people.

“So, what, do you have a crush on someone else?”

Iku was taken by surprise again. Her mind, all by itself, began to rummage through her memory, searching for someone. Before it could succeed, she forced it to stop. *Wait wait wait.*

*Who in the world did I think I was going to find?*



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Vaguely disturbed and trying to hide it, her reply came out a little more brusquely than she intended. “Not really, no.”

“Then you might as well go out with him, just to try it out. Something good might come out of it.” Shibasaki was glowing with pure scientific curiosity. “I’m immensely interested to see what kind of couple you two would make.”

“I’m not going to date him just to satisfy your curiosity,” Iku said grouchy.



Doujou’s squad completed their training shift in the archive, and moved on to the reference room.

They had a squad meeting preceding the administration division’s morning assembly. Iku felt stiff and awkward whenever she made eye contact with Tedzuka, but he never even batted an eyelid. It was almost enough to make her doubt her memory of his “proposal” yesterday.

Even so, facing him made her uncomfortable, so she tried to stay out of his way. Also irritating was Shibasaki, who was working the same reference room shift, and who every so often would glance over in her direction and grin broadly.

Her inner turmoil was affecting the quality of her work. She made many mistakes operating the computer, performing tasks she thought she had mastered. *Dammit, he’s caused me enough trouble already!* came the unfairly resentful thought.

When she stopped typing, she discovered that she confirmed the wrong command. Instead of sending a request to the archive, she had sent it to another library.

“Oh, no...”

She didn’t remember how to cancel the request. Taking a quick peek around her, the library staff at the counter all looked extremely busy. They had already given her exclusive use of one of their terminals so that she could learn her duties, so she felt uncomfortable about troubling them any further.

Of her colleagues, Komaki was the easiest to ask for help. But she didn’t see him around, just Doujou and Tedzuka. *How can he not be around when I need him? Instructor Komaki, you are useless!* she thought, being unfair again. Sighing, she stood up and jogged over to Doujou. Asking Tedzuka right now was out of the question.

“I’m sorry, can you help me with the computer?”

“Hmm?” Doujou put down the books he had been shelving and followed her back to the terminal she had been using. “What did you do?”

Not “*What happened?*”, but “*What did you do?*” He knew her too well.

“Um, I accidentally sent a request to another library.”



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“Ah, in that case...” Doujou began to answer, then cocked his head. “Didn’t I explain this to you once before?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I still haven’t completely committed it to memory.”

“I could have sworn I told you that if you didn’t remember something after the first time through, you would have to ask Tedzuka about it.”

*What?!* She cringed internally. Doujou must have picked up on it, because he scowled. “You two are still bickering?” he muttered in surprise, then called Tedzuka over.

“No, wait...!” Iku reflexively grabbed Doujou’s sleeve. Taken aback, he turned around and looked at her. She didn’t even know why she had done it. *What now? How am I going to defuse this situation?*

Doujou was looking at her strangely, but Tedzuka was already heading their way. Iku let go of his sleeve and murmured, “Never mind. I’ll ask Tedzuka.” Doujou looked like he wanted to ask what was going on, but he held his tongue and left them alone.

Tedzuka answered Iku’s questions in a very businesslike manner. He wasn’t particularly friendly, but there was none of his previous hostility, either. For Iku, this peaceable version of Tedzuka was quite a novelty; even so, she couldn’t turn around to meet his eyes as he stood behind her.

“Thank you so much for your help,” she said, eyes fixed on the screen.

Tedzuka bent down toward her slightly. “When can I expect an answer?”

Taken unawares by his surprise attack, she almost turned around, but held herself in place by sheer force. Her face was flushed, but it wasn’t from shyness or embarrassment; it was anxious confusion.

*What should I say? It’s going to look like I was thinking about him. Well, of course, I can’t help but be conscious of him, but that doesn’t mean I like him or anything...*

She was completely and utterly flummoxed.

“Sorry...I won’t take forever about it, but right now I’m a little...confused.”

“Understood,” Tedzuka replied briefly, then departed. Suddenly exhausted, Iku dropped her head down onto the keyboard.

It was so odd. Why was she the one who was so flustered? Usually it was the one who did the asking who was shaky and on edge. Tedzuka was too detached.

It was all a far cry from what the inexperienced Iku had expected from romance, and all it did was confuse her more.

“She told me he asked her out.”

On the way down to the archive, Doujou heard a voice calling down to him; looking up, he found it belonged to Shibasaki. She was leaning over the banister, elbows resting on the railing, looking down at him and smiling like a Cheshire cat. “Tedzuka. Asked



Kasahara.”

*Why did she feel the need to come tell me specifically?* He couldn’t discern her motive, and kept his face carefully blank.

“I thought you’d want to know.” Shibasaki smiled again. She had been idolized by the male recruits ever since she joined, and each smile was a thing of unique beauty. “I think Kasahara is pretty confused about the whole thing. She’s not that used to men, and on top of that, it’s *Tedzuka*. It’s not something I would have expected from him.”

Indeed, it seemed out of character for the previously antagonistic *Tedzuka* to take this sudden interest in Iku.

*“What exactly does Kasahara have to do to please you?”* He had tried to change *Tedzuka*’s mind about her with those words. He never would have dreamed that this would be the result.

Reflexively, Doujou looked down at his sleeve where Iku had grabbed it. The long sleeve of his dress shirt still bore wrinkled traces of her grasp. He remembered her bewildered face, gazing up at him from where she sat, and suddenly had the uncomfortable feeling that he had brushed her off when she needed him. He had thought they were just bickering like they always did—and so he had called *Tedzuka* over to help her, intending it as a message to them to cut it out, but if he had known—

*If you had known, what could you have done?* he thought, returning to his senses. There were no rules against office romances, nor had Iku explicitly complained about it. Even if he had known, he concluded that he still would have called *Tedzuka* over to answer her question. They had to depend on each other for help—Doujou was the one who had made that rule.

“I’m not really sure what *Tedzuka*’s thinking here,” Shibasaki continued, with a bystander’s amusement. “But with his personality, he’d probably take the relationship seriously, and while they’re going out they might develop feelings for each other, so I told her, why don’t you try him out? What do you think, Instructor?”

“How the hell should I know?” Doujou muttered. To Shibasaki, he said, “That’s between the two of them. Being their superior officer doesn’t give me the right to meddle.”

“Oh, I see. In that case—” Shibasaki leaned out even further over the railing “—would you like to go out with me, Instructor Doujou? I make a very devoted girlfriend.”

The way Shibasaki could nonchalantly say such things boggled his mind. She appeared quite attached to him, but the sincerity of that attachment was highly suspect.

“I’ll pass. I don’t think I could withstand the envy of the younger guys.”

“Ah, but even putting that aside, you’re so uninterested in me that you won’t steal me away when you have the chance?” she asked, pretending to be deep in thought.

“Silly girl,” Doujou laughed wryly, descending the stair. “Get back to work!”



“Yes, sir,” Shibasaki pouted, and with light steps, went back upstairs.



The sofas around the table were obviously originally part of a four-piece set, but the one across from the man and his partner was missing. Its removal created a noticeable imbalance. As he waited, the man began to wonder idly if it had been damaged and discarded, when the doorknob turned with a clink.

The man rose and watched the doorway, but no face appeared at the level of his gaze. Glancing down, he met the serene countenance of an elderly gentleman, at about the height of an elementary school student. *Oh, that’s right*, the man thought, as bits and pieces of half-forgotten knowledge coalesced into a recognition, but his young partner’s startlement was obvious, if without malice. The man clucked silently at the inability of youth to hide a momentary disturbance. *Rookie*.

The gentleman in the wheelchair addressed the man’s partner, smiling gently. “Long ago, I lost one of my legs. Walking is rather painful for me, so I beg your forbearance.”

The man’s partner belonged to a generation that wasn’t familiar the grim details of how this man had lost his leg.

The commander of the Kantou Library Base, Inamine Kazuichi propelled his custom wheelchair into the space where the missing—no, purposely removed—couch had been. He looked up at the two men, who had awkwardly gotten to their feet, and smiled again. “Please have a seat. I’d prefer it if we could talk face-to-face.”

He was good. The man bowed and sat back down, and his partner followed suit.

“You are the men from police headquarters, am I correct?” Inamine asked, though it was more of a confirmation than a query.

The man nodded. “I expect you already know, but we’re investigators on the recent serial murder case.”

The man presumed that Inamine had guessed his affiliation from the start, and indeed, Inamine did not look particularly surprised.

Which meant that he probably already knew what they had come for.

“I’ll get right to the point. We’d like you to hand over the suspect’s loan records from the Tokyo library system.” After the Improvement Act was passed, all of the libraries had been obligated to save all loan records for a specified amount of time.

Inamine didn’t answer. In the face of his opposite’s lack of reaction, the man had no choice but to explain. He had no time to indulge in an endurance competition.

“The boy hasn’t said a word since his arrest. We need something to prompt a confession. We’ve been told that the boy visited the library often, so we might be able to glean something



from his reading habits that we can use to shake him up.”

“Certain aspects of the crimes couldn’t have been carried out by someone without special expertise. If we found that the boy had checked out books on the subject, it might be useful for the prosecution...”

The man clucked—louder this time—at his partner’s “helpful” addition. *You and your big mouth!*

Inamine quietly spoke. “I’m afraid I can’t accede to your request. It would violate our duty of confidentiality, laid down in Article 32 of the Library Laws.”

His tone was calm, and not particularly stubborn, but it hinted at an uncompromisingly strong will. It would be nearly impossible to challenge it.

“Well, yes, but...” his partner persisted. The man couldn’t very well tell him outright that it was no use, so he let him talk. The negotiations had been doomed from the start, so it wouldn’t make any difference to public opinion if they made any more missteps. “After the biochemical terrorist attacks during the Shouwa era, didn’t the National Diet Library hand over information on their patrons to the police?”

During the last year of the Shouwa era—possibly coinciding with the Emperor’s funeral—a fanatic group had carried out a campaign of terror, using a nerve gas that had been forbidden by international treaty<sup>8</sup>. Since advanced knowledge was required to purify the gas, the possibility arose that the group had accessed books on the subject at the National Diet Library. The investigating authorities, bearing a warrant, had obtained the access records of the suspects—and at the same time, the access records of approximately five hundred thousand unconnected patrons, with the library’s tacit consent. The tide of fiery hatred against the terrorists was so high at that point that this was barely seen as a problem.

All this had happened before his partner was born, but apparently he had researched it as a precedent. He had all the passionate diligence of youth, but Inamine quietly refused to be persuaded. “Article 32 of the Library Laws took that incident into account.”

Libraries protect the privacy of their users. At the time, it had been the title of the third paragraph of the Japan Library Association’s “Declaration of Library Freedom.” Then the main points of that document had been made into law, and it had become Article 32 of the Library Laws. The original declaration had stated that the library need not comply with a request for information without a warrant, which the police did not have in this case.

“Even if it’s for a criminal investigation, it is a disgrace for the library to twist one of its greatest principles, to protect the privacy of our patrons. We should not have bowed to the

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8 This is an allusion to the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, in which members of a fanatical religious organization released sarin gas into five trains on the Tokyo Metro, killing a dozen people and severely injuring fifty. However, this incident happened in 1995, not 1989 like it does here.





pressures of those mad days.”

“But there was almost no public criticism of the library’s actions at the time. And this time, although the suspect is a minor, his crimes are terrible and brutal, and the public is vocal and angry. I’m sure they would value the cooperation of the library.”

“In my opinion, the sin of such brutal crimes is not lessened by the fact that the perpetrator is a minor. As a private citizen, if there was something I could do to aid the investigation, I would do it. But at the same time, I do not think it is necessary for the library to cooperate to the extent that we end up twisting our own laws. It is not necessary to bend one’s principles to fit the situation,” Inamine quietly concluded. The man’s partner probably didn’t detect the subtext of bitter irony in that statement from the library to the police. Twenty years ago, when the police had bent their principles to fit the situation, the result had been the Nightmare at Hino.

“A person’s reading material forms a part of their ideas, thus the library has a duty to protect its patrons’ ideas. It is not right to treat a person’s thoughts as criminal evidence.”

It was painfully clear that Inamine was right, and the police were in the wrong. After all, the police were implicitly ordering the library to bend its laws for their own convenience—the library’s position of adherence to the law was much more logical.

“But the suspect murdered three people. From a human standpoint, cooperation is the right thing to do.”

“Are you saying that laws need not be followed where criminals are concerned?” Inamine smiled thinly as he struck the heart of the matter. There was nothing but gentleness in the way his eyebrows and the corners of his eyes turned downward, in the way his lips curved upward, but there was still something in his expression that caused the policemen to quail. “If so, there are many people in this world who would agree with you. It would be a harsh punishment indeed, for criminals to lose their rights. If Japan, as a nation ruled by law, decided that was allowable, I would gladly ask the Kantou Library Force to fulfill your request for information.”

The man’s partner cocked his head in confusion. He didn’t appear to understand what they were facing.

Inamine was basically saying that if he was ordered by the judiciary to break the laws, he would obey. It was a strong and reasonable position to take against the police’s demands for accommodation. Inamine’s *reductio ad absurdum* argument was nevertheless an ethical one, and as the men thought about what their organization was asking, they realized that they didn’t have the moral authority to argue with him.

It might be an organization of debatable morality, but it was the one he belonged to, and it was his job to look out for its interests.

“I understand. I’ll take that to mean that the Library Force refuses to cooperate with





the investigation.”

Inamine smiled wryly at the cliché. It was a faintly sad expression.

As soon as they left the Kantou Library Base, the man turned to his young partner and bawled him out. During an attempt to obtain illegal information, even *hinting* at the idea of using that information publicly—even if the other party seemed inclined to cooperate, it would be enough to give them cold feet.

The man stopped when his partner had thoroughly withered under his criticism. “From now on, be more careful. I knew from the start that we wouldn’t be able to use our authority to extract cooperation from him, but he’s a special case.”

“What do you mean?”

“You must have at least heard about it—the Nightmare at Hino, twenty years ago?”

“Ah,” his partner nodded. “I was in first grade.” The reminder of the age difference between them made his eyes cross for a moment, but, “I had just entered the police force myself” was all he said.

“That man—Inamine—is a survivor of the Nightmare at Hino. That’s where he lost his leg.”

They were speaking of the attack on the Hino Public Library by a political organization sympathetic to the Media Improvement Committee, a horrible tragedy in which twelve members of the library staff had lost their lives. Inamine had been the director of the Hino Library at the time. The Library Force had been founded because of the incident, and Inamine had been a central force in its establishment.

The establishment of the Library Force was a twofold statement—first, that the library needed protection from the Media Improvement Committee and its associated organizations; second, that they couldn’t count on the police for it. Up until then, the police’s interaction with the library had been difficult to characterize. Each individual library had a security team that defended the library against the Improvement Special Agency’s censorship attempts, but they reported every incident to the police. However, the police rarely responded to these tips—in spite of the fact that the Improvement Special Agency’s raids were clearly larger-scale than was appropriate for public order. On the surface, they were just respecting the authority of the Media Improvement Committee—which was backed by the Ministry of Justice—but it was obviously the result of a balancing game between ministries, and since the library didn’t belong to a ministry of the central government, it was at a disadvantage.

Thus, the Nightmare at Hino. The attack hadn’t been carried out by the Improvement Special Agency, and the police clearly should have responded to the the library’s request for dispatch.



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“Should have...?” his partner asked, shivering a little.

The man nodded. “The police detachment was extremely slow to arrive. —Don’t ask why.”

A few days after the incident, the police had made an official statement. They explained that the delay in dispatch had been due to an incorrect report placing the responsibility for the raid on the Improvement Special Agency, but the Hino Library insisted that they had reported the attackers as persons of unknown affiliation. There was an investigation into where exactly the message had gotten distorted, but the trail went cold halfway through. Also, since the attackers had more firepower than they should have, the involvement of the Improvement Special Agency was suspected, but that investigation, too, was closed partway through.

Even the men connected with the investigation at the time agreed that there was something fishy about the way it had been closed, and it was not difficult to imagine that some sort of pressure had been brought to bear, by someone with no interest in justice.

*“It is not necessary to bend one’s principles to fit the situation.”* That ironic statement was the harshest possible criticism the library could offer to someone in the police force familiar with the incident. Because the police had certainly not been upholding the principles of justice during that case.

After that, the library had rushed headlong down the path of militarization. Nowadays, the Library Force had more battle experience than the police, and didn’t rely on them for protection.

How could you ask an organization that had washed its hands of the police long ago to break the law for their convenience? Especially when you were asking the former director of the Hino Library.

“I never would have thought he would still be on the front lines...” the man muttered, almost grumbling.

Though it might have been the grumble of one forced to the unenviable task of making an insolent request of an honorable man.

★

Suddenly, the library fell under heavy criticism.

It started when the police officially announced that the Library Force had refused to cooperate with the investigation of the recent serial murders. That item was only one small part of the announcement, but the story was picked up by every journalism company. All their arguments had the same tenor; it was enough to make one wonder if they had received some sort of suggestion from the police.



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*“Library Force Refuses to Cooperate with Police Investigation”*

*“Library Force Protects Teenaged Suspect”*

*“Bending the Library Laws to Benefit Criminals”*

Teen crime was on the rise, so there was little public support for the rights of underaged suspects, only overwhelming condemnation of the Library Force for refusing to cooperate with the investigation. Some of it was probably sublimated irritation at the stalled investigation—the boy still wouldn’t talk.

The objective reality—that the boy’s reading habits would only comprise a very small piece of his profile, and they would have no bearing on the direction of the investigation—was ignored, either unintentionally or by design. Instead, once it was confirmed that Inamine had been connected with the Nightmare at Hino, there was rampant speculation that the Library Force’s official position—*“Dealing with someone who may be a criminal does not give us license to distort the spirit of the law”*—was some kind of revenge against the police’s lukewarm response during that incident.

*Whatever history exists between the police and the Library Force, surely this enmity should not extend to other matters, other cases. Perhaps those affiliated with the library have spared no thoughts for the feelings of the victims and their grieving families, waiting anxiously for a resolution to this terrible tragedy.*

“...screw you, you third-rate reporter!”

Iku slammed the newspaper down on the desk as soon as she finished reading.

“What the hell kind of idiot are you!?” Doujou was on her case immediately. “That’s one of the newspapers for patrons to read! Where do you get off thinking you can treat it that way?”

Newspapers were also a part of the library’s collection. Every morning, they received dozens of them, which they put into newspaper binders and placed on the rack. The one Iku had thrown down had already been in a binder.

“But what is such an obviously biased article doing in a newspaper!? I don’t see why we have to offer media with articles like this!”

“If you’re going to take your anger out on something, do it with the newspapers at the dorm. These are library property, even if they present us in an unfavorable light.” Doujou’s tone was curt, but he hadn’t told her *not* to get angry—apparently he wasn’t going to deny the validity of her anger.

“How is it?” Doujou turned to Tedzuka, who immediately picked up the battered newspaper and examined it.

“No good, sir. It’s ripped.”



“Kasahara, go buy another one to make up for it,” he demanded, in a tone that would brook no nonsense, and pointed outside. Iku stood up from her work station, grumbling.

“...wait a minute, the binder’s broken too...”

Tedzuka’s “helpful” announcement had Doujou’s sharp rebuke ringing in Iku’s ears as she fled. “Next time you’re making up for damaged equipment too!”

*Jeez, Tedzuka! Why did you have to open your big mouth?* she thought, scowling. “I’m sorry!” she responded crisply, not bothering to turn around, and headed for the entrance of the building.

“Hot-headed as always, sir...”

Even though Tedzuka didn’t mention her name, Doujou knew he was talking about Iku. He gave an absentminded nod in lieu of a reply.

*“She told me he asked her out. Tedzuka. Asked Kasahara.”* It had already been three days since he had heard—or been forced to hear—the story from Shibasaki, and this was the first time since then that he’d been face-to-face with Tedzuka.

His manner towards Iku was critical, as usual—so why did he ask her out? He shook his head. *Though...the words themselves are critical, but the tone isn’t as harsh as it used to be, I don’t think.* Perhaps this was Tedzuka’s way of “giving her the recognition she deserved.”

Shibasaki’s uninvited revelation was provoking uninvited thoughts. Damn his brain. *Why should I care if they go out or don’t go out?*

“Kasahara and I might go out.”

Thanks to the uncanny timing, Doujou spent a panicked moment thinking that his internal monologue had somehow made it out his mouth. But no, it was just Tedzuka being Tedzuka, broaching the topic without a second thought.

“If Kasahara approves my proposal, that is.”

Hearing Tedzuka talk about it, it didn’t really sound like he was talking about his love life. *Approves my proposal? It sounds like a bureaucratic procedure. What would he call his confession to Iku, an application for a position?*

And why had Tedzuka brought up the subject with Doujou in the first place?

“You know, there’s no rule that says you have to keep me informed about your love life. Conduct your personal affairs however you see fit, within reason.” Tedzuka’s bemused expression was making him vaguely worried. “...only, if you two do end up going out, you better not try and pull any shit with her.” Before he had finished the sentence he was wincing. Why had he said something like that?

“Are you saying that because it’s Kasahara, sir?”

Tedzuka’s comeback hit him like a bolt from the blue. His first instinct was to bellow “Idiot!”, but it wasn’t as if Tedzuka had done anything wrong. He let out the breath he



had taken, hiding it with a cough, and began tucking the remaining newspapers into their binders. “Kasahara has nothing to do with it. Even if it were, say, Shibasaki, or...” He meant to list off a few female colleagues, but he realized there weren’t many he knew and could name off the top of his head. He covered the pause with another cough. “Anyway, I don’t like guys who screw around with girls, that’s all.” Damn, now it sounded like he was trying to impose his values on everyone else. He fumbled desperately for something else to say. “So, are you in love with Kasahara, then?” *No! Dear God, that is a totally inappropriate question!* With every word he was digging himself deeper. And Tedzuka, bless his forthright little heart, actually looked like he was going to answer. Doujou, in a panic, silenced him. “No, wait, it’s fine. Don’t answer that.”

He didn’t have any right as Tedzuka’s superior officer to ask the question, and Tedzuka had no duty to answer. *When did I become this stupid?* he despaired in a fit of self-loathing.

“Oh? Where’s Kasahara-san?” Doujou breathed a silent prayer of thanks at Komaki’s return. He had been fetching the tabloids that they would be processing that day. But—“Don’t tell me she went outside.”

Doujou’s expression went grim. “Did something happen?”

“Oh, it’s crawling with unauthorized reporters outside. Security is keeping them from entering the building, but they’re mobbing every staff member they can get their hands on.”

Doujou was pelting out of the reference room before Komaki had even finished his sentence.

The closest place that sold newspapers was a convenience store a short walk from the side entrance. Iku used her ID card to open the gate and exited onto the sidewalk. But before she had gone far, she was surrounded on all sides by a throng of people. It was enough to make her wonder, dumbfounded, where they had all been hiding.

“You work at the library, don’t you? I’d like to ask you a few questions!”

Everyone was shouting over one another, trying to introduce their newspaper or TV station, and Iku couldn’t catch a word they were saying. All she could tell was that they were reporters.

“Wait—please—I can’t—”

She tried to break through the wall of people, but they wouldn’t budge. It was like being caught in a rugby scrum, everyone working together against her.

“What do you think about the library’s decision to protect a criminal?”

Iku was frozen in place by the naked malice in that question.

“Yes, what do you think?” “Why is the library covering up for a criminal who killed three people?”



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“We—we’re not covering up for him!” she protested, cracking under the pressure of the flood of questions. *Let’s see, what’s the library’s official position—oh yeah—*“The library is just abiding by the principle of equal protection under the law!”

The air was instantly thick with vicious objections. “So, that principle should be defended even where criminals are concerned!?”

*How should I know?* “All citizens are equal under the law”—it was an assertion made not by the library, but by the Japanese Constitution. Nowhere did it say that it was permissible to deprive criminals of their rights under the law. But the attitude of the reporters interrogating her was so threatening, she was frightened to answer in the affirmative—even if the answer was common knowledge—for fear of how a simple affirmative would be interpreted by the press.

“What about you personally? The fact that three girls your age were killed doesn’t move you at all?”

*How the hell could it not move me!?* she wanted to yell, but she swallowed the impulse as if her life depended on it. Her opponents were trying to get under her skin to provoke a reaction, so getting angry would be equivalent to playing right into their hands.

*But not getting mad when people are trying to provoke you is freakin’ hard!* It was almost too much for someone like Iku to bear. All around her, voices were spouting arguments warped by malice, and being trapped alone under that downpour was agony. Their identical self-righteous faces irritated her even more.

“I’m sorry, please let me through! Please direct your questions to the Library Force’s public relations department!”

“Are you trying to run away!?”

*Did these people go to school to learn how to rile people up with such pinpoint accuracy? No, no, don’t say anything, anything you say will be bad press for the library.* Iku gritted her teeth and endured it.

“What do you think about the theory that the library’s refusal to cooperate is Commander’s Inamine’s revenge against the police!?” “Commander Inamine was a victim of the Nightmare at Hino, he must bear a grudge against the police for how that handled that case!”

*You’ve got to be kidding me!* she wanted to scream. The Inamine Iku knew had admonished her for being too pushy when she tried to help him, saying “Even patrons must have the right to refuse help.” The Inamine Iku knew had smiled, and told her “Well done,” after she apologized.

This media frenzy was the first time Iku had heard that Inamine was connected with the Nightmare at Hino, but she had a feeling that it would be a bad idea to ask for details from the reporters, and she didn’t have a chance to ask her superiors about it. Nevertheless, even as a lowly Librarian First Class, Iku firmly believed that Inamine wasn’t the sort of





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person who would let a personal grudge interfere with a criminal investigation.

“Are you going to put up with a base commander who mixes public interests with personal grievances!?”

—*do we have to take this kind of abuse!? Don’t say anything, anything you say will be bad press for the—aw, screw it.*

“Shut up! Just shut the hell up!” she had just opened her mouth to scream in fury, when—

“IKU!”

A voice shouted her name, sharply enough to pierce through the cacophony surrounding her. The shock of hearing not her last name, but her first name, spoken in that voice was enough to silence her. As she looked behind her and saw that the wall of people had crumbled, a hand came around from behind and covered her mouth. It held her in place as a low voice whispered, “Don’t say a word, there’s a good girl” into her ear.

“The Library Force’s public relations department would be happy to take the rest of your questions!”

Doujou, his arm wrapped around Iku, shoved his way through the crowd, heedless of the people around them. His stride was closer to ramming than walking. *Now I get it, you have to be this aggressive to break through.*

“Are you trying to run away!?”

Just as they had with Iku, a chorus of heckling cries followed in his wake. But Doujou just raised his voice, as if merely to be heard over the noisy crowd, and replied, “Please direct your questions to the Library Force’s public relations department!”

Passed through the side gate, he yelled, “I’m sorry, this entrance is for staff only!” He reached behind his back and closed the gate, giving the reporters no chance to follow, and quickly opened the door to the building.

It was only after they were safely inside that the cries that had followed them were finally silenced.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t get a chance to buy that newspaper.”

Thinking she should probably say something, Iku opened her mouth, and that was what popped out.

“It’s okay. I’ll go and buy one later. Until then, we can tape up the other one and put it out in the reference room.” Doujou’s reply was equally inane.

“You surprised me before, when you called me by my first name<sup>9</sup>,” she ventured.

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<sup>9</sup> In Japanese, using someone’s first name implies extreme familiarity and closeness, especially for adults. It’s not an exact parallel—we don’t have many in English—but imagine being in second grade and calling your teacher by their first name, and you’ll get some idea of the shock Iku felt here.





Doujou made a disgusted face. “There was nothing for it. I couldn’t call you by your last name—who know what those bastards would do if they got ahold of it?”

“It was a good thing you came, Instructor Doujou, a few more seconds and I...” *I would have yelled something irredeemably stupid.* The likely repercussions were just now dawning on her, and she quailed in fear. *Just what would they have written about me, if I had screamed at them to shut the hell up?*

“My timing could have been better, but I’m glad I made it in time. I ran after you like a bat out of hell as soon as I heard that there were reporters outside. I knew you wouldn’t be able to contain yourself in a situation like that.”

“I’m sorry, my temper’s too quick.”

“I’d say, rather, that you have a strong moral compass.”

Doujou’s tone was casual, and he didn’t appear to have put especial thought into his words. It was that very candor that broke through Iku’s emotional defenses. A sob escaped from her throat. *Why does he always take me by surprise and go all nice at times like this?*, she thought, half-accusatory.

Any second now he would get angry and start yelling and scolding, and as his solitary target, Iku’s self-assurance was taking a nosedive. She felt bitter shame at the fact that Doujou was always coming to her rescue.

Wiping her eyes would be the same as admitting that she was crying, so she let them be. But the tears wouldn’t stop, in the end. Doujou stood silently before Iku for a while, then at length, casually tapped his right shoulder several times.

“Go ahead, if you want.”

She would have refused, but her bravado had finally run out. She buried her face in his shoulder, drying her eyes on the fabric. She was wondering if was alright to wipe her nose as well, when he warned her, “Don’t get snot all over it.” She laughed a little, and then a childlike wail escaped from her throat. She swallowed it quickly, but—

“Go ahead and relax, I won’t laugh. You sound like a whimpering animal when you try and hold it in, and that’s even worse.”

“J-Jerk...” Iku tried to tell him off, but she couldn’t speak. She finally gave in to her tears, taking care to at least not sound like a whimpering animal.

*“Some of it is just unavoidable. After all, articles that criticize the power of the state attract unwanted attention. The Media Improvement Committee keeps a sharp eye on media dealing with those topics, and it’s even possible the ministries have established a warning network. In the world of journalism, if you’re restricted from acting for even one day events will pass you by, and your customers will go to your competitors for their information. The loss extends much farther than just one day’s profits. Going with*



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*the flow is just another kind of self-defense, and the reality is, we've become a society where one has no choice but to self-regulate. If you want to talk about blame, you could say that the citizens who created that society are to blame, in the sense that they were so indifferent to politics that they stayed silent while the Media Improvement Act was passed."*

After he had let Iku cry for a while, Doujou began to lecture for some reason, probably to try and calm her down.

*But I've heard that the news media didn't raise a fuss even when the Media Improvement Act was passed.* She mentioned this to Doujou, even though there was nothing to be gained by complaining, but he just said, "There's a time and place to try and fight something."

He went on, explaining that the number of journalists on their side was small, and that they didn't stand out because they had to make do with oblique language to evade the eyes of the inspectors, and admonishing her not to be so hasty in giving up on them. After the ordeal she had just gone through, she was reluctant to accept his position, and she grumbled and argued like a middle-schooler on a moral crusade. She realized Doujou was playing devil's advocate, but she couldn't stop debating with him. So many of her sentences began with "but" or "even so," that she suddenly remembered Tedzuka's observation that the only thing she did her share of was whining. Certainly children were saying "but" all the time.

Doujou argued patiently with her until she had run out of steam, then patted her head gently and said, "All right, you must be okay, if you can complain that much. Let's go back."

Eyeing his back as she followed him, the line of his shoulders lower than her own, Iku unconsciously bit her lip.

*Damn. It's tall.*

Before she could pursue her prince, she had to get past Doujou. It had been early spring when she had psyched herself up with that thought. But the wall she had to get over just kept getting higher and higher.

★

The questionnaire had been distributed to every library in the Tokyo area. Iku and Shibasaki got theirs at the dorm, and apparently they were being passed out to the men in the same manner.

The title was straightforward: "Survey concerning the surrender of information in the teenaged serial killer case."



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1. How do you view these crimes?
  - a. Unforgivable
  - b. Forgivable
  - c. Neither a nor b
2. Are you aware that the investigation has stalled due to the teenaged suspect's refusal to talk?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
3. Do you think that it is important for the case to be resolved quickly?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Neither a nor b
4. Supposing the investigation could progress again thanks to information provided by the Library Force...
  - a. I believe the information should be provided
  - b. I do not believe the information should be provided
  - c. Neither a nor b
5. How do you feel about the Library Force's decision to adhere to the principles of the Library Laws?
  - a. I agree
  - b. I disagree
  - c. Neither a nor b
6. If a forum were held concerning the treatment of this incident, would you support treating it as a special case and making an exception for it?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Neither a nor b

“What the hell is with this survey? It's nothing but leading questions!” Iku complained, making a face.

“It's the acting director's doing,” Shibasaki answered, pouring water for tea.

“What is he plotting this time!?” Yes, there was no proof, but the memory of how the acting director had effectively sided with the Board of Education and tried to censor books was still fresh.

“This time I don't think he's being manipulated by anyone in particular, though. He just hates to go up against the status quo,” Shibasaki shrugged, handing Iku a cup of tea. In other words, he was acting on his own because the public outcry against the library had him shaking in his boots. “I've heard that he and Commander Inamine are arguing



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over the release of the information. The acting director claims that Library Force policy shouldn't be left up to the commander's discretion alone."

"What kind of logic is that? The Library Force following the principles of the Library Laws is the most natural thing in the world!"

"Maybe. But don't forget, every library director has the right to suggest making an exception."

Reflecting its origin in a time when every library was under independent management, the Library Force did not have a "chief" overseeing the entire organization. Personnel and finance affairs were generally handled collectively at the main base of each region. In an emergency, the base commander would make a decision based on the principles of the Library Laws, but every library director had the right to lodge an objection to that decision.

A library director and a base commander held equal rank, so if they disagreed over policy, a forum was convened by the libraries involved to debate the two stances and find a compromise. Depending on the situation, the Library Association might also attend in an observational capacity.

"If you interpret Section Four too broadly, it's easy to find ways to make exceptions. In fact, Article 32 itself says, 'Libraries protect the privacy of their users,' not '*must* protect.' Of course, the spirit of the law is obvious, but it leaves far too much up to the discretion of the library." Shibasaki was extremely knowledgeable—just as expected from a self-proclaimed member of the Brain Power Party. "But I'll be ashamed if we end up bending our principles when the police haven't even served us a warrant."

If the library gave in to the police's implicit demands to bend their laws, when the police couldn't even get a warrant for the information, the library's reputation would be dragged through the mud. It might even set a dangerous precedent that would eventually jeopardize the authority of the Library Laws.

Right now, anger over the case was foremost in the public's mind, and an overwhelming number of people were asking why the library wouldn't cooperate with the investigation, which complicated the issue. If the library handed over information on a patron under the merest pressure from police, it would mean that the library's pledge of privacy was worth very little. However, it would require a certain change of perspective for virtuous citizens to see how that could be problematic. It was difficult to imagine a situation where the suspect was actually innocent, for example, since there was so little chance of that in this case. It was also difficult to imagine this one exception creating a widely-used precedent.

"This survey is pretty shrewd, actually."

"Maybe," Iku acknowledged reluctantly.

Ever since the library had come under criticism, the Kantou Library Base and the



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Musashino First Library had been flooded with phone calls and protests, so many that they interfered with operations. The protesters were prompted by a sense of justice and genuine outrage over the case, and their motives were pure—grief for the victims, anger at the perpetrator, and hope for a swift resolution. But, inevitably, the library could not hope to satisfy the protesters while still maintaining the line it had drawn. The library was trying to be honorable in its own way, but the citizenry didn't understand that—instead, the library's position drew still more criticism. That dilemma was slowly wearing down the library staff. Abstractly, they understood that upholding the Library Laws didn't mean protecting criminals, but it was painful to be on the receiving end of so much righteous anger. The survey was skillfully targeted at the exhausted, vulnerable library staff. It seemed to ask, *what's wrong with complying with the noble requests of the citizenry?*

It was anonymous as well; another stroke of genius. When the results were tallied, there would probably be quite a large percentage in favor of making an exception for this case. And the acting director could claim that he was representing the wishes of the library staff.

“Like I wanna be represented by the likes of him!” Iku filled out the survey, eyes flashing. Her answers were *Unforgivable*, *Yes*, *Yes*, *I do not believe the information should be provided*, *I agree*, and *No*. She didn't see any other way to answer the first three questions, but the apparent inconsistency between her first three answers and the others irked her. *There should have been a question in between them, like, “Do you understand what ‘uphold the principles of the Library Laws’ means?”*, she mused.

“For someone who just waits to see how the wind blows before acting, he's clever. It's annoying,” Shibasaki grumbled, filling in her survey as well.

“Oh, hey...” Iku leaned forward, sensing a change in topic. But Shibasaki took the conversation in an unbelievable direction. “I heard that after your run-in with the press, Instructor Doujou held you while you cried?”

Iku choked on the tea she had been sipping. “Th-that's not true...!”

“Or was it that he hugged you, not held you...?”

“Even less true!”

Her vehement denial had Shibasaki glaring at her. “Everyone's saying so, though.”

“But it's not true! We were...” she tried to explain, and suddenly realized what it must have looked like to others. She colored. “In the first place, if that *were* the case, wouldn't we have been a bit more circumspect about it? And Doujou would have done the same thing even if it had been you, or Tedzuka, probably. In that circumstance.”

“You have an evil imagination,” Shibasaki said, wrinkling her nose, apparently imagining Tedzuka in Iku's shoes. *You could have imagined yourself instead, weirdo.* “Well, I guess if you say there was a reason, there was a reason.”



Shibasaki appeared to accept her explanation, and Iku found a question she hadn't meant to ask slipping from her mouth. "Do you...love Instructor Doujou, Shibasaki?"

"Not really?" Shibasaki answered, head cocked, not looking particularly bothered or embarrassed. "It's rather ambiguous?" *What's that supposed to mean?* "I've wondered what it would be like to go out with him, but that's about it. Apparently Instructor Doujou isn't that interested in me right now anyway, so I guess I'll wait and see," Shibasaki said casually. Iku was taken aback. If Shibasaki knew that Doujou wasn't interested in her, she must have made some kind of proposition to him. Iku immediately wondered when Shibasaki had done so, and why he had said no, and then she was taken aback again by her own interest. *No—no—it's just simple curiosity!*

"On another note, didn't it trouble Tedzuka? His superior officer moving in on his territory?"

"Yeah, I think he was kinda troubled..."

"Oh!? Then he must be pretty serious about you!"

"See, but it wasn't anything like what you're probably imagining."

After her clash with the media, she had run into Tedzuka during shelving duty, and he had suddenly asked her, "Should I have gone after you?" The question was so out of the blue that it took her a minute to figure out what he was talking about. It wasn't until he added, "I mean, I did ask you out," that she caught his meaning. He was asking if he should have come to her rescue during the morning's media frenzy.

"Oh, no, it's okay. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure you could have broken through the crowd even if you had come," she answered frankly. Tedzuka frowned reluctantly. She was unwilling to clarify and explain that at the time, only a superior officer could have restrained her fury, so she left it at that.

"Library Officer Doujou went pale and ran out when he heard," Tedzuka stated in an even voice. "He certainly takes things seriously where you're concerned."

Iku stiffened, thinking he was making fun of her, but in fact, Tedzuka seemed almost sulky about it. *Whereas before, this would be where he said, "Don't let it go to your head," or something,* she reflected.

"Well, but you never get into situations where a superior officer has to take things seriously and come give you backup. Me, I've got bad luck, or something's wrong with me, so..." *...wait, why am I comforting him over something like this?* "So, are you saying you want to be in a position like mine? One where you really need backup?"

"Absolutely not. I couldn't bring myself down to your level." *The same thing Shibasaki said once!* This time it was Iku who grew sulky. *Is that the kind of thing you say to someone you asked out, however superficial the confession was?*

"So, when are you going to answer him?" Shibasaki asked. Almost ten days had passed



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since Tedzuka had asked Iku out. “Things are going to get really awkward if you don’t do it soon.”

Iku groaned and buried her face in her hands. She would rather it had never happened in the first place, but dragging it out would only make it worse.

“Let me know how it turns out!” Iku knew full well that there was nothing but naked curiosity behind the request. She shot Shibasaki a glare.

★

“I support the principles of the library.”

Genda’s statement preempted the question he knew he’d be asked. “However, a large proportion of the library staff support making an exception in this case. They’re wavering because public opinion is against us.”

Inamine, who had called Genda to his office, blinked bemusedly for a moment, then laughed. “You never beat around the bush, do you.”

“Evasion doesn’t agree with me, sir.”

When delicate problems like this arose, Inamine always consulted with Genda. As the commander of the Library Task Force, he was directly involved in the functions of both the library and its defense, and so he had the most balanced, firsthand perspective of anyone in senior management. The assistant base commander’s factional loyalties might have also played a part. The Library Force was split between two factions: those who placed value on the principles and the independence of the library, and those who thought that the library should be placed under the control of the government. Within these two factions were a multitude of differing opinions, so one couldn’t easily lump them all together, but for the most part, the two factions rarely agreed.

Acting Director Toba, who had made many suspicious moves since he had taken up his post, also had personal ties to the governmental faction. The assistant base commander supported him as a member of the same faction, so Inamine couldn’t confide in him. It was possible to say that the two factions put checks on each other and created an organized balance, but it also made the Library Force too fragile to be united in the face of public pressure.

“The governmental faction will be able to say that they’re following the will of the people and the staff when they advocate for an exception. I’ve been thinking that maybe we need an angle with that kind of appeal.” *Maybe I shouldn’t say this*, he thought, but added, “At this rate, I don’t think we’ll sway them.” He didn’t think that the other side thought things through as carefully as Inamine did. This request for an exception, especially, was nothing but a reflexive response to the public criticism. Genda privately thought that their





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lack of resolution was pathetic, but of course he couldn't state that as his official position.

Inamine didn't state his agreement directly. "Let's enlist the Library Association and the Society for the Study of Librarianship. They can distribute copies of their minutes to the staff," he proposed.

"Good idea. That should raise awareness of the principles involved." It was the right step, and he didn't need Genda's approval to know it, but it was good to have confirmation from a field representative all the same. It was evidence of his integrity—and with regard to this case, his hesitance.

"To tell you the truth..." Inamine smiled painfully. "If someone asked me if I wasn't just being obstinate with the police because of bitterness over the Hino case, I don't think I could definitively say that I wasn't."

Genda had no reply for that. He couldn't use easy words when he knew the size of the burden that had been laid upon Inamine by the Nightmare at Hino. His missing leg comprised no more than a small fraction of it. At that time, twenty years ago, Inamine had been in his mid-forties. Genda would reach the same age in a few years, but he wasn't confident in his ability to carry the kind of burdens Inamine had been forced to bear.

And by joining the Library Force, Inamine continued to shoulder new ones.

"It's easy to bend your principles." Even as Genda wondered if he was saying too much, he knew he had to continue. "But I think that it's only by defending them that we truly understand them."

Inamine gazed for a long time at his hands folded upon the desk, then at last, nodded silently.



As the Library Force argued over whether to follow its principles or make an exception, the Board of Education came to visit the Musashino First Library again.

The Board's collusion with the Improvement Special Agency to commit censorship still fresh in its memory, the library immediately went on alert. The fact that there was overlap between the teenaged suspect's collection, the Board of Education's list of undesirable books, and the Media Improvement Committee's list of books targeted for censorship was already common knowledge in the Library Force. The library didn't think that that the Board would use the same trick it had used before, but even so, the Defense Force elevated its alert level and increased the number of personnel guarding the library and patrolling the streets.

It was just after the Board of Education had entered the director's office that Shibasaki, burning with curiosity, sought Iku out.

"Kasahara, Kasahara! We're going to the director's office!"



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“What? But I’ve been posted here...” With the elevated alert level, Doujou’s squad, which was working the reference room, was also assigned to its security. In an emergency, they would lead any patrons to safety.

“Gathering information is a perfectly legitimate part of security. Anyway, if anything happens, it’ll come from the outside. They’ll hold out long enough for you to get back to your post—otherwise, what’s the point of the increased security measures?”

Shibasaki could be a first-class debater when there was something she wanted. Iku, overwhelmed and only half-convinced, left the reference room with Shibasaki.

“The assistant director is there too, right? Couldn’t we just wait until it’s over and ask him for the details?”

“You don’t understand the true essence of intelligence gathering, Kasahara,” Shibasaki told her, tiptoeing up to the door of the director’s office and pressing an ear to it. The fourth floor of the library building, where the director’s office was located, contained only things like the reception office and the boardroom, so few people were about, but even so, Shibasaki’s pose of blatant eavesdropping seemed like a bad idea. However, Shibasaki continued her lecture, unconcerned. “You don’t get the same nuances when you hear it from someone else, and other things, like the atmosphere, you really want to ascertain for yourself. Anyway, aren’t you dying to know why they came?” The Board of Education hadn’t made clear the reason for this visit, so she was indeed curious about their objective. “Everyone else must be dying to know too, so we’re here on an important reconnaissance mission.”

“You invent a lot of good excuses, but in the end, you’re just doing this because it’s your hobby.”

“Is that bad? ...drat, I can’t hear.”

Shibasaki tsked, gripped the doorknob, and slowly twisted it. “Hey!” Iku hissed, sure that she was going too far, but Shibasaki hushed her sharply without even turning around. The door silently opened a few millimeters, and Shibasaki brought her ear close to the gap. Iku gave up and followed suit. She had already come far enough to cement her complicity, so there was no point in being the only one who couldn’t hear.

“Thank you for coming the last time. I’m sorry you had to be exposed that kind of danger.” That was the acting director.

“Not at all. I’m grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today in a more relaxed fashion.” That must be the visitor. Each was feigning innocence and lying through his teeth.

“How can we help you today? If it’s about putting lending restrictions on certain books, then, as we discussed before, Article 31 of the Library Laws gives us the right to offer



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information freely, so we would find it difficult to comply with your request.” This was the assistant director, trying to halt the discussion before it started.

The acting director chided him, with a self-satisfied look. The visitors wouldn’t be swayed either, ignoring the hint and saying, “Well, we’d like you to reconsider that position a little...”

“Man, this is pissing me off,” Iku whispered.

“That’s the way it is,” Shibasaki answered.

The two were concentrating all of their attention on the room, so they didn’t notice the person behind them until it was too late.

“What are you two doing?” a voice queried in astonishment.

Iku let out a squeak. Even cool Shibasaki gulped and stiffened with terror.

When they turned around, they saw Komaki standing with a tray, offering it to the two of them. There were four teacups on the tray. Just as there were four people in the room.

“Look, if you’re going to eavesdrop, at least bring some tea. If you time it right, you might even hear something while you’re inside.”

“Me. I’ll go,” Shibasaki volunteered, quickly taking the tray. “You don’t mind, right?” she said to Iku. *Whether or not I mind, you have absolutely no intention of giving up that tray, do you?*

At that moment, one of the visitors began to speak, hinting that they were getting down to business. “The reason we’re here today...” Shibasaki smoothed the wrinkles out of her pencil skirt with one hand and counted; when enough time had passed and the occupants of the room were fully engaged, she knocked quietly and slipped into the room.

Shibasaki’s graceful appearance didn’t appear to faze the room’s occupants at all. “... we’ve come regarding the young suspect in the recent serial killings,” the visitor continued without pause. Shibasaki entered the room, artlessly leaving the door slightly ajar so that Iku and Komaki could hear.

“Oh, no, not that...!” The acting director’s reply held an undignified note of panic. The assistant director tried to silence him, but he blurted, “There’s been a lot of discussion here over the response to that case...”

“The Board of Education greatly appreciates the library’s response.”

That statement was like a bolt from the blue for Iku, and it looked like the acting director felt the same way. “What?” he asked in wild confusion.

“However heinous his crimes, the suspect is still a minor. It is not necessary to disclose his private information wholesale to the police, even from a human standpoint. It would also be better for the boy’s rehabilitation, if the library didn’t get swept away by all this emotional, short-term sophistry.”



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“I...see,” the acting director replied, as if all the wind had gone out of his sails. Apparently he had thought that the Board would object to the library’s refusal to cooperate with the police.

At that point, Shibasaki left the room. “No good, that was as long as I could stay,” she pouted.

“You endured well,” Komaki thanked her wryly.

After that there was nothing but the sound of voices, overheard through the slightly open door.

“We hope that the library will continue to respond in a way that respects the boy’s civil liberties.”

Straining to hear, Iku frowned. *Was that meant to encourage or persuade?* She couldn’t tell.

“Why is the Board of Education suddenly siding with the library?” Just a few days ago the Board had been taking hostile action against the library, and now it sounded like they were defending it. Iku was suspicious of their sudden change of heart. But Komaki and Shibasaki were nodding in unison, apparently not surprised.

“Well, it was within the realm of possibility.”

“True.”

“What are you getting so damn smug about?” Iku glowered.

Shibasaki answered, “Basically our interests are in alignment. The boy’s father is a high school principal, remember? The Board wants to keep this scandal to a minimum, since it involves one of their own.”

“It isn’t likely the boy’s reading log will provide anything more than another perspective for his profile, but it may also come up at the trial,” Komaki added.

The library’s noncooperation was lambasted in the media, and the governmental faction, starting with the acting director, plotted to reverse the library’s position and make an exception for the case. The Board of Education’s declaration of support would be a powerful weapon to keep those forces in check. But Iku just frowned harder.

“It’s just kind of...sickening...”

The Board had gone up against the library and plotted to censor materials, in order to minimize the impact of the scandal. And yet when the police requested the boy’s lending records from the library, the Board pressed the library to protect the boy’s rights. It was disgustingly hypocritical.

“Well, maybe,” Komaki smiled bitterly.

“It isn’t like we’re doing this to protect that boy—I hate hearing it put in those terms!” The library was fighting for its own rights, not his. Iku had absolutely no desire to protect the boy. The staff’s opinion could be summarized thus: “We have no choice but to protect



the principles of the library, but I get so mad when I think that we're protecting them for the sake of a cold-blooded killer, even if he is a minor." It was the complete opposite of the Board of Education's stance of "even if he is a killer, he's still a minor." Indeed, the staff had good reason to resent the boy, as he had earned them the unwarranted ire of the public.

"Still, the argument that we're doing this out of consideration for a minor has a nice ring. The public won't object to the Board of Education standing up for the rights of a child, either. If the Board backs us, it might be the Library Force's salvation."

Iku understood that Komaki was right, from a utilitarian perspective, but she couldn't accept it in her heart. Iku opened her mouth to object, but she realized she didn't want to match wits with Komaki, so she sank into silence.

As if agreeing with Komaki, inside the room the assistant director began to speak.

"We're honored to have your support, but right now, even within the Library Force opinions are divided over whether to follow the principles of the Library Laws. We'd very much like to respect the suspect's status as a minor, but public opinion is against us, and as things stand, we may find it difficult to resolve the matter without bending our laws."

The assistant director was in favor of following the library's principles—so why was he suddenly siding with the acting director and the rest of the governmental faction?

The visitors replied, "We presumed as much. The Board of Education has been thinking about issuing some sort of statement in support of the library's decision."

*What the hell is this self-serving fake-charity bullshit?* The wrinkles in the middle of Iku's brow grew deeper. Shibasaki whispered, "Good one, assistant director!" but Iku couldn't respond so maturely.

"Disappointed?"

Without looking at his face, Iku knew that Komaki's sudden question was directed at her, and not Shibasaki. Acknowledging that he was right on the money meant facing her own smallness. It was a bitter sensation.

"I'm going back."

Intentionally ignoring the question, Iku left the others in front of the door.

Iku ran into Tedzuka on the way back to the reference room. Meeting him one-on-one was awkward, since she still hadn't given him her answer, but right now she would rather face him than Komaki. Perhaps due to that fact, she was able to speak with him in a comparatively normal fashion.

"Is something wrong?"

"I came to find you. Library Officer Doujou said that three people was too many." He had seen right through them. "What happened up there?" When Iku hesitated, he asked, "Was it bad? You seem down about something."



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Tedzuka's question was probably intended to be solicitous, but instead it depressed her even more. She hated the fact that she was so easy to read.

"No, it wasn't really anything to get depressed over."

"If you want to talk about it with someone, I wouldn't mind..." This stiff, slightly apprehensive offer was Tedzuka's way of making up for the fact that he hadn't come to her rescue a few days ago. She put her faith in this stolid sincerity and told him what had transpired in the director's office.

But his reply was, "You're right, that isn't anything to get depressed over," confirming what she knew intellectually. "The assistant director's response was perfectly appropriate."

"I knew you'd see it that way, too." Iku sighed, obscurely disappointed. She had hoped—felt—that Tedzuka would understand what was bothering her, if she explained it from a moral perspective.

"We're not champions of justice. There's no point in holding ourselves to impossible standards of scrupulous consistency."

*"Don't get the wrong idea. We're not champions of justice here."* Genda had said the same thing during their training period. Hearing it again, unexpectedly, depressed her even more.

"It's the results that matter. It can't be helped if the means make you squeamish."

Iku had no answer for that. She understood what he was saying. "But there *are* champions of justice in the Library Force." The "prince" she had met in high school—and another candidate who fit the bill, though she was reluctant to acknowledge him. But there was no help for it. A person who always boldly came to her rescue when she was in trouble displayed the hallmarks of a champion of justice.

"Library Officer Doujou would probably say the same thing as the assistant director," Tedzuka spoke knowingly. *Ah, so Tedzuka sees Doujou in that way too?* "When it's time to make a decision, people who wring their hands over how the decision gets made are all talk and no action."

This criticism probably wasn't directed at Iku, but it sure felt like it. "Way to kick me where it hurts," she muttered resentfully.

Tedzuka frowned reluctantly. "You have no right to say that to me," he flung off, then stood up and walked away.

She couldn't think of what he meant, but she could believe in the examples of Doujou and her prince, who were certainly not all talk, and her complicated feelings were somewhat settled.

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Just as promised, the Board of Education broadcast their support for the library's decision





in every medium. It caused quite a stir among the overexcited public and the media. The topic of dialogue shifted to the pros and cons of protecting the boy. The announcement also succeeded in derailing the plans of the acting director and the rest of his faction. They had more ties with the Board of Education than with the police, and they were hesitant to antagonize the Board by moving in direct opposition to the Board's official stance.

Eventually, the boy confessed, and the tide of criticism receded from the library as though it had never been. The movement within the library to reverse the commander's decision also stopped completely. There were no signs that the results of the questionnaire ordered by the acting director were being used. Eventually, when people complained and asked what the point of the survey had been, he gave the somewhat questionable explanation that that it had been a simple opinion poll.

Meanwhile, the Library Association formed a "Committee for Consideration of Library Principles," to reflect further on what it meant for the library to follow its principles, using the case as food for thought. It was announced that the proceedings of the committee would be distributed to not only the Kantou libraries, but every library in the country.

"A more or less flawless victory, wouldn't you say?" Shibasaki commented smugly, flipping channels on their TV as the evening news went to commercial. Every channel was discussing the boy's confession—criticism of the library's noncooperation had totally disappeared. "The acting director is keeping his mouth shut too, as much as it seems to pain him."

Iku pouted with displeasure. "It feels more like a stalemate than a victory. Like the other side just arbitrarily packed up and went home."

"You know, if we had actually fought it out, *that* would have been the bigger problem," Shibasaki scolded half-heartedly. "But you probably know that." This indifferent addition was Shibasaki's brand of incomprehensible kindness. "Fence-sitting turned out to be a good strategy this time."

*Still feels like unfinished business*, Iku thought, keeping silent this time. She wasn't just talking about the acting director. No one had backed down from their positions, but suddenly it was like the conflict had never happened. It left Iku feeling extremely unsatisfied.

Except, that was probably because she had been deeply involved with the whole business. It wasn't as though Iku got worked up over each and every similar incident all over the world. Perhaps, she thought, it was only because she had been hurt that she was taking it so seriously. Apparently this was a kind of pain that you couldn't really empathize with until you had personally experienced it. *That means I'm being plenty arbitrary myself*, Iku thought, sinking into depression.

"Well, all's well that ends well, right?" Shibasaki declared. Iku wasn't sure if Shibasaki knew what she was thinking, but it was an undisguised attempt to bring the topic to a





close.

And suddenly they switched to a new topic.

“Well, the only pressing matter remaining is the thing with you and Tedzuka.” Iku thought it likely that she would continue with something like, “*It’s pitifully unfair to leave him in suspense.*” But what Shibasaki said was, “So, what are you going to do? You going to go out with him?” Nosy curiosity had won out.

Iku began to answer, then looked away. “You’re not the one I should be telling first, now are you?”

“True enough,” Shibasaki conceded unexpectedly.

In the end, Iku left Tedzuka waiting for almost two weeks.

On their way home, Iku asked him to take a detour with her, which he took to mean that she was ready to answer him. Sure enough, she broached the topic the minute they were seated at the nearby cafe. “About that thing from the other day...I don’t think I can go out with you after all.” It was a predictable way to phrase a refusal, but what came next was anything but predictable. “I mean, really. You and me going out? It’s unthinkable.”

Of course, he hadn’t expected her to accept him at this point—he would have been more confused if she had—but to go so far as to call it “unthinkable”? Tedzuka frowned, offended. “What do you mean? It’s not totally unthinkable.”

“Yes, it is totally unthinkable,” Iku asserted mercilessly. “Because you don’t actually like me. And I don’t like you. It makes no sense to go out if there are no romantic feelings between us.”

He couldn’t find grounds to deny that the lack of affection between them equated to a lack of romantic feelings, but somehow, it galled him to concede defeat and go home. So he contended, “But a lot of people go out just to see if things work out between them.”

“Yeah, I thought about that one a bit too, but it just doesn’t make sense for us. In those cases, there are romantic feelings on at least one side. When you ask someone out and they don’t return your feelings, you tell them they should at least give it a shot, if there’s no one else they’re interested in.”

He himself had been told something like that several times in the past, but it made trial dating seem all the more natural. He had actually gone out with some of the people who had given him that speech. When he told Iku this, she made an irritated face.

“Like I said! That’s logical, because the girl who asked you out liked you. This is different! It isn’t logical to go out if neither party likes the other!”

“Then what about *omiai*<sup>10</sup>? In that case you go out with each other before any romantic

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<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia: “*Omiai* is a Japanese custom whereby unattached individuals are introduced to each other to consider the possibility of marriage.” It’s the Japanese version of arranged marriage.



feelings develop.”

“Hey, wait, wait, no verbal acrobatics! I’ll get pissed off if this turns into a battle of wits and I lose,” Iku gestured wildly, shutting Tedzuka up. “That’s only for people whose goal is to get married. Are you thinking about marriage with me, so soon?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” he blurted out.

Iku scowled. “Thanks a lot. But that’s exactly my point, don’t you get it?”

The drinks they had ordered arrived at that moment, leading to a temporary truce. After the waitress had left, Iku continued.

“But in a sense, *omiai* are a good example. The emotions of the two people involved are the same—they each want a partner so badly that they’re willing to date someone they’re not in love with yet. I can understand that. But do *you* really want a girlfriend right now? I bet you don’t, not especially.”

He couldn’t deny that her brazen assertion was correct. “But if one of the people wants it, isn’t that enough?” he asked, not thinking.

“Screw you,” she shot back. “I’m not desperate enough to go out with a guy who doesn’t even like me.”

It had come out as an insulting question. “I’m sorry,” he apologized sincerely. Iku still looked irritated, but nodded forgiveness. When she looked calmer, Tedzuka asked another question. “So if I did like you, would you have gone out with me?”

“You have not one iota of interest in me, yet you ask that?” Iku muttered, shocked.

He had much more than an iota of interest in her—but he supposed she meant romantic interest, so he didn’t contradict her.

“Anyway, given that, why on earth did you ask me out in the first place?”

It was a long story, and he didn’t really want to get into it. It had started with Doujou goading him with, “*What exactly does Kasahara have to do to please you?*” Then when he had talked to Komaki about it, Komaki had told him that there were things he stood to gain from Iku. He refused to believe such a thing at first, but the final blow came from Iku herself.

“*Even though you’re afraid of heights!?*” He had been shocked not only by the intensity of her veto, but by the fact that she had discerned his weakness. He felt like a loser for not realizing it earlier. Iku hadn’t let on that she knew about his fear of heights—but he had taken every opportunity to point out her failings. It made him feel about three inches tall. And then she had said, “*It’s like you’re not satisfied unless you’re the best at everything!*”, which had made it even worse. “*Being right doesn’t give you a license to say whatever you want.*” At the time, he had rebelled against Komaki’s words, but now they resounded painfully in his memory.

At that moment, he had begun thinking that maybe he really did have things to gain



from Kasahara Iku.

But a play-by-play explanation like that would sound like a concession of defeat—not something he would relish. He answered to the extent he was comfortable. “Library Officers Doujou and Komaki told me that there were things I could learn from you, which piqued my interest. And Commander Genda wanted me to warm up to you.”

“The *hell!*?” Iku exclaimed, making a face that went past all bounds of politeness. He thought about telling her that it was an unbecoming expression for a girl, but decided to mind his own business. “What manner of idiocy is that?” Iku spat, and turned her head contemptuously. “You’re not in love with me, you’re in love with your superiors. I feel like an idiot. I took you at your word, and got all worked up, when you weren’t taking it seriously at all.”

“How dare you say that?” he protested. He had asked her out in good faith—how dare she imply otherwise! But Iku’s anger went several levels beyond his.

“I mean, weren’t you being too hasty? Going straight to dating.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you think we have the cliché ‘love begins with friendship?’”

“...that’s true, there is that.”

“What? You *idiot*,” Iku muttered audibly. That, though, he couldn’t refute.

“I just meant it’s a nice, tactful way to turn someone down, I’ve found.”

“Was that supposed to be a dig at me, you bastard?! Yeah, I’ve been rejected with that cliché too, and never once has the relationship developed past friendship!”

“But you’re doing the rejecting this time, so it should be fine.”

“This barely counts as rejecting, when your ‘proposal’ was so stupid to begin with!” she yelled waspishly.

At that, Tedzuka suddenly burst out laughing.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing, it’s just...I was thinking, you might make a pretty entertaining friend.”

“Bite me! Who do you think you are!” she snarled rudely, then muttered imprecations to herself. Apparently she had been rejected with that line too. “Look, you and I are not friends! Like I’d be friends with you, after all the times you looked down your nose at me!”

“That’s okay, you’re entertaining enough as a coworker.”

“Stop calling me ‘entertaining’! It pisses me off!”

“*Entertaining*” means more than “comical”, he wanted to say, but Iku was in such a snit that anything he said would probably just make things worse.

Komaki had said that Iku reminded him of Doujou. It might be rather interesting to study their similarities.



Chapter 3: Libraries protect the privacy of their users.

“Incidentally, is there someone you’re already in love with?” he asked out of sudden curiosity. Though, since “I’m already in love with someone else” was the very easiest way to turn someone down, he thought it unlikely.

“No, there isn’t,” she answered quickly, then after a moment, added, “...I don’t think.” Interested in spite of himself, he looked questioningly at her. “No, what I mean is...” she waved her hands, as though she had confused even herself. “There’s someone I admire very much. I’m trying to catch up to his level, so I don’t have time to fall in love or anything like that.”

He wondered suddenly if she was talking about Doujou.

“Then we have something in common,” he said.

Iku’s eyes flashed violently. “Not bloody likely! *Your* hero is Instructor Doujou, am I right? Well, he’s not mine! I’m going to surpass him! Don’t lump me in with you!”

“Who...who the hell do you think you’re kidding!?” Surprise made Tedzuka rude. “You couldn’t surpass him in a hundred years! And anyway, if something is easy enough for you to surpass, I’ll have already surpassed it first!”

“Shut up! I said I’ll surpass him and I will!” He was surprised again by her stubbornness, but he noticed she didn’t deny his other assertion.

He wished Komaki were here, so he could ask him just how this upstart could remind him of Doujou.



## Chapter 4

Libraries oppose all censorship.

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Chapter 4: Libraries oppose all censorship.

★

“AAAAAAAAAUGH!”

Iku’s scream attracted the attention of everyone who happened to be present in the dorm’s entryway. It even brought people over from further inside the building.

“...jeez, you scared me! What do you think you’re doing, yowling like a boiling cat?!” Beside Iku, giving her grief, was Shibasaki, who had come back to the dorm with her. The temporary crowd was scattering, surmising that nothing serious was happening.

Iku had no attention to spare for the events around her. She stood frozen in front of her personal mailbox.

“Hey, what’s wrong? You boiled to death?”

After a long pause, Iku answered hoarsely, “...it’s come.”

Shibasaki peeked at what Iku was holding. “What, a postcard?”

Though Iku hadn’t seen it in seven months, since they enlisted, the handwriting was unmistakable. It was from her mother.

*Dear Iku,*

*How are you? We’ve been worried about how you’re settling in, since we haven’t spoken much since you got your job. Don’t work too hard; take the time to call once in a while. Your father was disappointed that you didn’t come home for the Bon Festival<sup>11</sup>. Be sure and come home for New Year’s.*

*During the holidays in November, we’ll be coming to your uncle’s place in Tokyo for a memorial service. On the way home we plan to come visit your library. We look forward to seeing you in your workplace.*

*Mother*

“Oh my...”

“What should I do? What am I gonna do, Shibasaki!?”

“Well, for now...”

“Oh! You have an idea already?” It had been a rhetorical question and she hadn’t expected an answer, so she hung on Shibasaki’s words. Shibasaki was strangely streetwise and shrewd, and maybe she had some wisdom that would help Iku endure her parents’ invasion.

“We should hurry over to the mess hall and eat dinner, otherwise the baths will be crowded when we get done.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“What do you expect me to do about your personal family problems? If you prefer worrying about that over the immediate concerns of a meal and a bath, I won’t stop you,

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11 A Japanese festival to honor the spirits of one’s deceased ancestors, occurring in the summer.



Chapter 4: Libraries oppose all censorship.

but don't expect me to join in." Shibasaki was pragmatic as usual, but this lack of sympathy was shocking.

"Damn you and your super-pragmatism," Iku sulked.

Shibasaki ignored her. "You can tell me about your parents while we eat, is what I'm saying. Learn to read into things a bit more."

However, Shibasaki broke her promise as soon as they entered the mess hall and found Doujou and Komaki eating there.

"Good evening! Okay if I sit here?" Shibasaki slid in next to Doujou without waiting for a reply or consulting Iku. Her honesty regarding her own desires was boldly pure, but more heartless than it had a right to be.

*Even if I don't hate Instructor Doujou as much as I used to...she promised she'd listen to me complain!* Iku pouted as she bowed to the inevitable and sat down next to Komaki.

"What happened? You look gloomy," Doujou asked her. Her expression must have been rather transparent. Komaki looked in her face too, and exclaimed, "Her face is easy to read, isn't it," almost an odd compliment.

"Nothing happened, really..." she replied noncommittally.

"If you screwed something up at work, you better let me know now," he warned her sternly.

Iku glared at him. "I did not screw anything up, sir! Why do you link that with me being depressed?!"

"Statistical likelihood," he replied matter-of-factly.

She was at a loss for words, much as she wanted to respond.

"Statistically speaking you'd be right, of course, but this time it's something else." Iku couldn't tell if this was Shibasaki supporting her, or delivering the final blow. "She's depressed because her parents are coming to carry out an inspection."

"Hey! Don't tell the whole damn world about it!"

"Should you be using that kind of language, with your parents coming so soon? It might make a bad impression."

*Ow! Salt in the wound!* Iku fell silent.

Doujou murmured to her, "Now that I think of it, your parents were opposed to your enlistment in the Defense Force, weren't they?"

Iku frowned suspiciously. She didn't remember telling Doujou about that. "Could it be that you used your position as my superior to illegally access my personal information, sir?"

"What the hell kind of idiot are you!?" This time it was Doujou who glared. "Who was it that made someone else throw away a postcard dripping with personal information, right after she enlisted?"





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His words brought back the events of early spring. *“If my parents read that postcard they’d make me come back home,”* she had explained. If she recalled correctly, that was the postcard where she had tried to tell her parents that she was going to be in the Defense Force.

“Oh yeah...but why would you commit someone’s weaknesses to memory like that? That’s an ugly habit.”

“...I don’t have to commit your weaknesses to memory; you demonstrate them daily! You never seem to get tired of making the same mistakes!”

“Oh! That was inexcusable!”

“Quit playing the victim! You were the one who started hurling random accusations!”

Komaki, laughing wryly, interrupted the two hotheads. “Doujou didn’t commit it to memory so he could use it against you later. It’s only normal to be worried when someone’s parents oppose their ambitions. It’s a dangerous line of work. There are plenty of recruits who have quit for that reason.”

“Leave it be!” Doujou snapped at Komaki. He grabbed his tray and stood up. “I’m going back,” he said in a tone that would brook no argument, and stalked off to the counter.

“Well, that was transparent,” Shibasaki observed in surprise as she watched him go, before turning to Iku. “You moron.”

“What did I do?”

“The cooperation of your superiors is going to be indispensable if you want to weather the storm of your parents’ inspection. Telling them what to tell your parents, getting your shifts changed, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, *shit*.”

“By the way, you also committed a capital crime against me, making Doujou run off when I finally got the chance to sit with him.”

“I don’t really care about that part.”

“Will your parents come to your workplace?” Komaki asked from beside Iku.

Shibasaki answered for her. “Yup. Her parents are super-overprotective, believe it or not. They want to come check up on their precious daughter.”

“Cut it out!” Iku was quite ashamed of her over-attentive parents.

“They don’t seem like the kind of parents you can tell not to come. If we were a business, she could tell them that unauthorized people weren’t allowed in, but that won’t work with a public library.”

“But would it be so terrible for them to visit your workplace?” Komaki didn’t know her parents, which was why he could ask that question.

“Oh, yes, apparently it would be plenty terrible. If they found out that Kasahara had a combat occupation, they’d faint on the spot, and probably try and force her to come back home.”



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“...erm, don’t tell me they don’t know we hired you for the Defense Force...” Komaki trailed off timidly.

Iku nodded reluctantly. “I haven’t told them yet.” Komaki winced, and she hastened to add, “I was just about to explain everything...”

“...when they announced they were coming.”

“...yes, sir.” By this time she had nearly curled herself into a ball.

“Well, we can be accommodating in terms of shifts and whatnot...but if they seek official confirmation of your assignment, the Library Force cannot lie for you. If you get found out, the rest is between you and your parents.”

*He’s right. I can’t argue with that.* Iku’s shoulders slumped. At times like this, Komaki appeared easygoing, but no amount of tears or tantrums would move him. In some sense, he was even more unyielding than Doujou.

In the end, she would have no one to rely on but herself.

“Still, the timing could be better,” Shibasaki observed pityingly. “They couldn’t have come at a more turbulent time if they’d planned it.”

After the teenage murder suspect had been indicted and the criticism over the withholding of his information had calmed, a new problem had befallen the Tokyo libraries.

The Tokyo Board of Education was leading a crusade to tighten regulations. They argued for putting lending restrictions on problem books that had a bad influence on young minds and introducing standards for selecting books for purchase. Their arguments were plainly driven by hysteria, but in the wake of the violent crimes committed by a minor, they managed to gather the support of the public. The relationship between the perversion evident in the crimes and the boy’s personality was much discussed, and the media’s sensationalist discourse on the influences of entertainment media only fanned the flames. The Improvement Committee and the Tokyo Assembly also backed the Board’s position, and Tokyo libraries were subjected to a flood of demonstrations and protests from a variety of organizations. As the headquarters of the Library Force and the largest public library in Tokyo, the Kantou Library Base and the Musashino First Library bore the brunt of this assault.

Among the protesting organizations were fanatical ones who didn’t scruple at violent methods, and it was not uncommon for skirmishes to break out between them and the library. Their connections to the Improvement Committee had long been whispered, but since there was no proof of the rumor that the Improvement Committee supported their actions, it remained a rumor.

“The rock-throwing is adorable, but seriously, throwing Molotov cocktails? I mean, like, what an anachronism!” Shibasaki laughed humorlessly. To the library, which defended itself against the Improvement Special Agency’s attacks on a daily basis, the protesters’



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methods might be crude, but mayhem was mayhem, after all.

Iku may have succeeded in concealing her combat occupation from her parents, but if her workplace itself was dangerous, how much would that count against her? Her spirits sank just thinking about it.

“So your parents are coming?”

“Yeah, not until next month, though.”

This grumbling exchange with Tedzuka took place during their guard shift as they kept watch on a demonstration outside the library. They had reached a stopping point in their library duties training, and since then they had gone back to guard duty. The Task Force rotated through library duty, guard duty, and training when they didn't have any special missions assigned.

The target of their surveillance was a local PTA group, the “Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing.” An assembly of nearly a hundred people was in full swing on the front grounds of the the Musashino First Library. Because it was easy for trouble to break out during the climax of a demonstration or assembly, it was necessary to keep watch on them. Since openly lining up in uniform would be asking for trouble, Task Force members were posted in plainclothes. From their position they could see Doujou and Komaki, as well as members of other squads.

“You know, your parents are unexpectedly...”

“Don't say overprotective, I'm tired of hearing it.”

Tedzuka fell silent—apparently that was indeed what he was thinking.

“My parents are super-crazy that way. They objected to me entering the Library Force because it was dangerous. If they found out I was in a combat role... The point being—” here she looked up at Tedzuka “—if my parents ask you anything, will you tell them what I tell you to say?”

“Sure, I won't tell them anything.” Tedzuka cocked his head, a bemused expression on his face. “Are parents so overbearing towards girls even when they're adults?”

“Not exactly—my parents are especially overbearing...but it's certainly common for girls to have strict and overbearing parents. A lot of my friends who live at home say that their parents are really strict about curfews and sleeping over somewhere else. And, for instance, object to them getting a motorcycle license because it's too dangerous. I would say it's more common for parents to object to a daughter having a dangerous occupation than a son.”

“Really?”

“It's because we still have a concept of a girl being ‘damaged goods.’ ‘She won't be able to get married if she gets scars on her face,’ is an old parental cliché.”



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“So they wouldn’t mind if their daughter married someone who would reject her if she had scars?” Tedzuka looked more confused than ever.

“Parents don’t think about it that deeply. There’s this stereotype that girls should be girls, and they shouldn’t be doing anything dangerous,” Iku replied, while thinking, *Ah, if only I had thought of that retort when I was younger!* Her parents had worn out that reprimand on her, but now that she thought about it, it was not a persuasive point.

“How about you? How did you parents react?”

“You think my family would object, in their position?”

“Oh, right.” His father was the president of the Library Association—of course they wouldn’t object.

“It looks like it’s going to end without any problems,” Tedzuka murmured, watching the speaker on the platform. Even as they conversed, he was keeping an watchful eye on their surroundings, while Iku was carelessly neglecting her surveillance duties. She was no match for Tedzuka in this area—though more to the point, there were few areas where she *was* a match for Tedzuka.

“So it seems,” she agreed automatically.

Tedzuka shot her a glare. “Stop pretending you were paying attention,” he rebuked her. They didn’t get into knock-down drag-out fights like they used to, but his sternness was unchanged.

*He’s just like a mini-Doujou*, she was thinking uncharitably, when—

*BANG!* came a loud, dry crackling sound, followed by several more. The crowd screamed and scattered.

“Gunfire!?” Iku cried.

“No!” Tedzuka contradicted. “Fireworks!” He seen them being thrown into the crowd.

Doujou’s voice came from her wireless earpiece. “*Kasahara, get them! They’re behind you!*” Iku and Tedzuka spun around and saw two fleeing figures, across the street that ran in front of the library.

As if responding to a starting gun, Iku’s feet kicked off from the ground. She was across the street in an instant, crossing two lanes of traffic by weaving between gaps in the stream of cars. She plunged toward the corner where the figures had turned. The perpetrators had slowed to a jog after turning the corner, perhaps relaxing now that they were hidden from view of the library. When they heard Iku’s pursuing footsteps, they turned and shouted in surprise, and sped up again. But this momentary deceleration was to be their undoing.

*Don’t think you can run from a girl who ran track for ten years and ended up in a combat post.*

As she got closer, she noticed that the figures were surprisingly small. No, they were short, about as short as Doujou or maybe a little more. But they didn’t seem to be fully



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grown—and then she realized. They were children.

“Stop this instant! Stop or I will take you down!” she warned, but just as she expected, they didn’t stop. She took aim at the slower of the two and put on a burst of speed. She was upon him in a moment, and took him down with a tackle. She seized him as they fell, and they tumbled together onto the road.

Catching only one of the perpetrators would suit their purposes for the present. They could find out the identity of the one who got away from the one they captured. But the one in the lead seemed reluctant to abandon his captive comrade, and he looked back, his feet slowing.

“Stop!” It was Tedzuka, catching up to them. “Are you going to leave your friend here?” His masculine voice held more authority than Iku’s could. *Dammit, I wish my voice were as low as his*, but this was perhaps too much to ask.

As if Tedzuka’s arrival had been the last straw, the other boy stopped dead in his tracks. He seemed middle school-aged. “Good, now get over here.” He could have gone over to capture him, but Tedzuka was merciless to the end. The boy’s face twisted with pain, but he was compelled to return.

The boy Iku was holding down appeared to be a middle-schooler too. She hauled him up and held his hands firmly behind his back—she couldn’t bring herself to put him in handcuffs. Then she took up her radio. “Librarian Kasahara to Officer Doujou. We’ve secured the two suspects.”

*“All right, well done. Any injuries?”*

“None on either side. But, um...they’re children. Both of them.” *What should I do?* she tried to imply tacitly.

Iku’s report appeared to surprise Doujou, as he was silent for a moment. “...for the time being, bring them back to the guards’ common room. Use the staff entrance, and try to avoid being seen by too many people. I’ll be there as soon as this ruckus is settled.”

“Understood.”

She put away the radio and turned back to Tedzuka. Her eyes widened. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Securing the prisoner, obviously.” Tedzuka was implacably putting handcuffs on the other boy, who was bright red and staring down at the ground.

“That crosses the line! Let him go!”

“Why? He threw fireworks—incendiary devices—into a crowd of a hundred people and ran away. Even for a prank, it’s too vicious. This is an obvious measure to take.”

“They’ve lost the will to fight or try and run. You of all people, you’re already dragging a demoralized kid in for questioning, surely there’s no need for something as over-the-top as handcuffs!”



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“That’s not the issue. We should be taking all possible measures to discharge our duty, no matter who we’re dealing with.”

“Sounds good in theory, but wouldn’t you say it’s too inflexible in practice!?” Tedzuka flinched a little, wondering why Iku was so riled. “Instructor Doujou didn’t tell us to be ruthless with them even though they were kids.”

Iku firmly believed that his order to be inconspicuous was out of consideration for the children. Of course, the fact that seeing a child led away in handcuffs would stir hostility against the library had probably entered his calculations, but his first priority must have been to avoid causing the children undue suffering. That was what the Doujou Iku knew would do. *Sure, because he’s pretty nice to everyone except me.*

“In the first place, it’s completely backwards for a library to be hurting children. We can leave the lecturing to our superiors. There’s no need for us to play judge, jury, and executioner right now.”

One of the origins of the modern public library system was the cooperative book collections maintained by mothers who wanted to provide their children with books. As the entity that had taken over that role, one of the duties of the modern library was to serve children.

Tedzuka glowered reluctantly for a moment, but at length he silently removed the handcuffs from the boy’s wrists, and following Iku’s example, he held the boy’s hands behind his back.

Iku glanced sidelong at Tedzuka’s scowling face. —*Maybe it isn’t reluctance...maybe it’s hurt*, came the fleeting thought. She had no idea what had hurt him, though, so she let it be.

“All right, let’s go,” Iku said threateningly to the children. Avoiding causing the children undue suffering was not the same as being soft on them. “My fearsome boss is going to lecture you to within an inch of your life. Just to warn you, he’s a hundred times scarier than either of us. Remember, if you were adults, we would have put you in handcuffs for what you did.”

“...are we to be arrested?” The boy Iku had captured spoke for the first time in formal tones. He must have gotten the idea from Tedzuka’s handcuffs.

“Who knows?” Iku replied evasively, though she expected it wouldn’t go any farther than a lecture and a call to the boy’s parents. As Tedzuka had said, it was a vicious prank, so it was best to frighten them as much as possible into good behavior.

When they returned, the assembly was still in a uproar, so Iku and Tedzuka steered clear of the front grounds and brought the boys inside by way of the staff entrance. After they had entered the building, Tedzuka broke his long silence to say coldly, “That panic





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was your doing.” Each boy bit his lip and looked down at the ground, but they looked a bit defiant too, as if there was something they wanted to say in their defense.

They explained the situation to the guards in the common room and got them to leave, then sat the boys down. Before Doujou and the others arrived, they had gotten the names and addresses of the two children. Both were eighth-graders at a local middle school. The one Iku had captured was named Kimura Yuuma, and Tedzuka’s captive was Yoshikawa Taiga. It appeared they were close friends.

Iku tried to calm them by serving tea, but they maintained stiff expressions and didn’t so much as touch their teacups. However, they didn’t seem particularly sulky or rebellious; in fact, they appeared to be rather serious, intelligent boys.

*So why did they do a thing like that?* The mystery was only deepening.

Investigation and castigation of the children was beyond the power of two rookies, so they awaited the arrival of their superiors in an oppressive silence. Before long, they heard loud, clomping footsteps coming up the hall. *Ah, here he comes.* Iku and Tedzuka exchanged a glance, and then the door burst open.

“Where are those rascals?!”

It was Genda. Following in his gruff footsteps were Doujou and Komaki; apparently they had called Genda and apprised him of the situation.

“You two! What the hell were you dimwits thinking!?” Genda’s voice was loud even when he was speaking normally; when he raised his voice, its power was incredible. He wasn’t actually shouting at the moment, but it was rare for adults these days to show such powerful anger, and on top of that, Genda had the hard, fierce face of a mobster. The children cowered before him. With what willpower they had left, they tried hard to pretend they weren’t frightened, but unfortunately their efforts were fruitless.

However... “*Namahage*<sup>12?</sup>” Iku murmured in spite of herself. Next to her, Komaki clapped a hand over his mouth and looked away. Apparently the comparison had tickled his funny bone.

“...now is neither the time nor the place...” Doujou tried to scold her, but his voice shook a little. Tedzuka was staring at the floor with an expression of forced gravity; it was clear that he was trying not to smile. Apparently it had tickled all three. The resemblance was simply too uncanny.

Komaki suddenly couldn’t hold it in any longer and quietly left the room. Doujou

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12 Wikipedia: “On New Year’s Eve, a group of young men dressed up as fierce demons or bogeymen, *Namahage*, visit each house in the village, shouting: “Any misbehaving kids live here?” They then scare children in the houses, telling them not to be lazy or cry, though little children often do burst into tears. Then the parents will assure the *Namahage* that there is no bad child in their house, and give food or traditional Japanese alcoholic beverages to the demons.”





bopped Iku hard on the head.

“Hey, I’m against superior-on-subordinate violence!” she hissed in protest.

He brushed her off. “Shut up, how could you be stupid enough to set Komaki off at a time like this?!” Iku made a face. *What the hell? You were laughing too.*

The children, however, were listening ashen-faced to Genda’s harsh lecture. *I’m sorry, Instructor Doujou would have been a hundred times scarier than me, but Commander Genda is at least a thousand.* But it was much too late for apologies.

Even so, the children had admirable mettle; they didn’t cry once, though by the time the lecture was over they both had tears in their eyes.

Komaki had finally returned, and Doujou sat down in front of the children. “We should have gotten to this before, but now we’d like to hear your story.” He darted a glare at the children. Doujou’s fearsomeness was no less strong for being different from Genda’s, and the boys shrank back once again. “We explained it to the crowd as a childish prank, but by all rights we should be handing you over to the police. Why would you do something like that?” The boys remained silent. “After what you did, don’t think that you can hide behind the fact that you’re children.” He didn’t shout, but his censure was remorseless.

Yoshikawa Taiga’s head snapped up. He flinched as he met Doujou’s eyes, but—“It wasn’t a prank!” he spat angrily, and then looked down again.

Kimura Yuuma raised his head, as though the baton had been passed to him. “It was a protest action against the Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing.”

Like a child trying on his father’s shoes, his use of grown-up language was somewhat comical, but none of the adults were inclined to laugh. The Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing was the very group that had assembled today.

Meaning that Kimura Yuuma and Yoshikawa Taiga had been purposely targeting this group when they threw their fireworks.

“Could you explain that further?” asked Komaki.

Kimura Yuuma sat up as straight as he could. “That committee is trying to divest us of our right to choose our reading material freely.”

*Oh dear!* Iku rubbed the back of her neck, embarrassed. She understood that Komaki’s even tones, as though he were addressing an equal, had encouraged Kimura Yuuma to these linguistic heights, but his overuse of stiff, formal words was discordant in someone his age and sounded blatantly affected. It was embarrassing to listen to.

“Our middle school’s library had a liberal system for book purchase in which the students oversaw the selection process. But after the recent case of the high school serial killer, the Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing intervened, and a large number of books meant for entertainment were discarded. Their basis for disposal was self-righteous



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and dictatorial. We couldn't possibly sanction it."

"Like, they said *Kana of the Wastes*<sup>13</sup> was 'undesirable,' because the main character has a gun...it was total B.S." *Kana of the Wastes* was the title of a popular series of light novels. The story took place in a Western-style world, where a girl who aspired to be a first-class gunman grew and matured as she wandered the world on her motorcycle. The Musashino First Library owned it, but being popular with young people of all ages, it was often checked out.

"That's hysterical nonsense..." Komaki frowned slightly.

The Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing endorsed the plan set forth by the Board of Education and demanded the removal of books that had a harmful influence on young people from every library in the city of Musashino, but this was the first time they had heard that such a movement was already underway in a school library. The Library Force was far removed from the goings-on at school libraries.

School libraries were governed under the School Library Laws, distinguishing them from the public and private libraries that were governed by the Library Laws. In other words, they weren't subject to the Law of Library Freedom and thus had no authority to gather censored materials freely. They received some in the form of "donations" by the school librarian or the teacher in charge of the library, but the number was always pitifully small and therefore basically overlooked by the Media Improvement Committee. Communication between the Library Force and the school libraries was mediated by the Japan Library Association, to the extent that direct communication was nonexistent and unnecessary. After all, if the school libraries carelessly associated with the Library Force, they might become more of a target for the Improvement Special Agency.

University libraries resisted governmental authority out of a sense of autonomy and independence, so they didn't fall under the Library Laws either.

"That series has never been censored by the Improvement Committee, has it?"

Tedzuka nodded at Komaki's assertion. "Or at least, it's never been listed as a top priority for censorship." It seemed he had memorized the list of high-priority materials. Iku was speechless with amazement—and a little jealousy—at this typical display of superiority.

"Since the books in our school library have become regulated, the only place where we can enjoy the freedom to read as we choose is the public library. We couldn't turn a blind eye when the the Committee for Reflection tried to infringe upon the freedom of the library as well. We thought it was imperative to act to support the freedom of the library and express our opposition as children to the Committee for Reflection—"

"And the result of these grand ambitions was fireworks?" Doujou cut him off, sounding

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13 Deliberate homage to *Kino's Journey*, a light novel series (and anime) with approximately the same plot.



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distinctly unimpressed. Kimura Yuuma's eloquent, free-flowing speech stopped in its tracks. "Support the freedom of library? You've only made trouble for us."

*Ouch! Heartless!* Doujou's annoyed tone was so blunt that even Iku, a bystander, squirmed in discomfort. The thought of that tone being directed at her sent chills down her spine.

"We were trying to help the library! The Committee for Reflection is your enemy too, and they wouldn't be so smug if they knew someone opposed them!" Yoshikawa Taiga railed. The threat of handcuffs had subdued him for a time, but he seemed to be rather aggressive at heart.

But it was a thousand years too early for him to try and cross Doujou.

"You carried out a surprise attack on your enemy without stating your reasons or grievances. That's not a protest action. That's harassment, plain and simple." The boys' faces twisted painfully at the harsh, stark word. "The Committee for Reflection went through all the proper procedures in order to hold their assembly today. Which party comes off as more respectable, the ones who follow proper protocol, or you, the ones who throw fireworks at them?"

Doujou had a remarkable skill for striking at his opponents' most vulnerable points with pinpoint accuracy. Heaven knew how many new recruits he had brought to tears with this power during training.

"Are you calling the Committee for Reflection *right!*? All they 'reflect' on is how they can take away the books we want to read!"

Iku clutched at her chest unconsciously as sudden memories pierced her like a knife to the heart. She recalled her indignation and helplessness as the book she had hid under her blazer was exposed and taken from her. These children too knew the pain of having a book you wanted to read taken away from you.

It was impossible for children to buy all the books they wanted to read with their allowance, so there was no doubt that the shelves of their school library, full of their coveted books, were precious to them. Students oversaw the selection of books at their school, Kimura Yuuma had said, meaning that they must have a large collection of books whose only qualification was that the students wanted to read them, free from any interference from adults. A library where "message" or "merit" didn't matter; where all that mattered was that the books were entertaining to children. That broad-mindedness was a valuable thing to have in a school library, but it was unpopular with adults who wanted children to only read meaningful material. "Children should be made to read only worthwhile, meaningful books. Children should learn something from the books they read." This was the Committee for Reflection's position in a nutshell.

*Why aren't adults more forgiving of children reading books purely for entertainment? It's not like they don't do it themselves!*



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Yoshikawa Taiga was glaring at Doujou, taking out on him all the resentment he felt towards the adults who were trying to restrict his reading. Iku flinched back from his expression, but Doujou didn't even blink. "The Committee for Reflection's methods at least are right, yes. Opinions expressed in the proper way have the advantage that they're backed by people who follow the rules. The reason adults follow procedures is to create support for their opinions. Can you say that your methods would have the same effect?"

Would a stranger respect the position of someone who said, "*In order to protest the Committee for Reflection's attempt to restrict my freedom to read what I liked, I threw fireworks into one of their gatherings*"?

Doujou's question could only be answered in the negative. The children didn't say anything, but bit their lips and looked down. Their ears were red, either from guilt or helpless shame.

"If you talk about the freedom to read what you like, then throw fireworks at your opponents, they're just going to get the wrong idea and interpret it as a promise: 'Children will resort to violence if we let them read freely.' It's the last thing we need, with all the talk about the high school serial killer's reading habits."

"But—!" Yoshikawa Taiga began to argue, but Kimura Yuuma held him back.

"Let's drop it. All we succeeded in doing was shooting ourselves in the foot. Let's be men and admit that we've lost."

It wasn't a matter of winning or losing, but the principals were so deadly serious no one wanted to throw cold water on them. Iku looked away, fighting a smile. Tedzuka just looked surprised, and Komaki was smiling, charmed.

"We're very sorry. Is there anything we can do to atone for what we did?" Kimura Yuuma offered, brimming with earnestness.

Doujou put on a grim face, perhaps because he would laugh otherwise. "Don't worry about it—" —*there's no need for atonement, just pipe down and listen*, he might have continued, but a deep voice interjected.

"I like your grit!" Of course, the voice's owner was Genda. Doujou started and turned around to look at him. *Where the hell are you going with this?*, his eyes demanded. Genda took no notice and turned to face the boys. "How would you like to see how adults settle their differences?"

"Commander!" Doujou finally interrupted, but Genda was not so easily checked.

"You can appear in a forum between the library and the Committee for Reflection."

"No, you can't!" This was addressed to the boys. However, their interest had been piqued and their eyes were shining. "Those puppy dog eyes aren't going to make any difference! There's no place for you!"

"That's not for you to decide, Doujou."



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“Nor is it for you to decide, Commander!”

“Yes, but I have bargaining rights with the base commander.”

“That’s an abuse of your authority! And your gloating doesn’t change the facts!”

*Wow...I wonder why he has so much fun when he fights with the commander?* Iku stifled a smile, while next to her, Komaki murmured philosophically, “You know you’re going to lose in the end.”

The “Forum for Consideration of Voluntary Restrictions on the Library” was planned for two weeks hence, in the middle of October. It had been suggested to the Musashino First Library by the Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing. The Board of Education’s recommendation for tightening lending restrictions for minors was targeted at all the Tokyo libraries, but the Committee for Reflection was based in the Musashino local PTA, so their demands were limited to Musashino itself. The First Library had been approached as the representative of all municipal libraries. The forum planned to discuss the effects of reading material on minors, restrictions on lending books to minors, and voluntary restrictions on books selected for purchase by the library. It was a recipe to drum up support, as the minutes would be distributed to the local PTA, but the library would be looking to thwart the Committee for Reflection during this debate.

The forum would be held in the Musashino First Library’s great auditorium. One hundred and twenty people planned to attend; it would be quite a large-scale event. The faction that supported the library’s principles was hard at work planning their attack—this was their chance for a direct showdown with the civilian groups who clamored for tighter restrictions. At the same time, the governmental faction maneuvered to slow them down, hoping to drag out the fight.

Of course, the Library Task Force was shouldering the main part of security at the forum, and they were busy drawing up security plans and schedules.

“I heard your superiors are dragging kids into that bloodthirsty forum? Their eccentricity remains undiminished.”

By the time Iku returned to the dorm, Shibasaki was already familiar with all the details. Iku was unsurprised; it was a commonplace occurrence by now.

“It was terrible, Instructor Doujou and Commander Genda had this major confrontation.” Iku grinned in memory as she changed into loungewear. “After we sent the kids home they bickered endlessly. Well, I guess Commander Genda didn’t say anything, so it was more like Instructor Doujou tilting at windmills.”

“Ah, I can just picture it. I just love his hopeless, idiotic earnestness.”

“That isn’t complimentary, not at all. Are you sure you’re his fan?”

“Let’s leave that aside for now.”



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“Let’s not!” Iku protested, but Shibasaki ignored her.

“I understand Instructor Doujou’s feelings. You’re talking about an event that had to be arranged in a hurry to begin with. Try to stick something new in the schedule and everything gets out of whack. And he’s the type that gets the shortest end of the stick when that happens.”

Genda tended to sketch out an outline of a plan and then pass it on to Doujou to implement, and no one else seemed inclined to step into Doujou’s shoes.

“He’s just a smidgen too talented for his own good; that’s why he loses out so much.”

“See! Wouldn’t you find a nicer way to say it if you were a fan of his, even if you were being ironic?”

It would certainly shame Doujou to hear himself damned with such faint praise by a new recruit in her first year, but all Shibasaki said was, “You don’t have to tell him I said that,” nonchalantly. “Well, I guess since you’re his subordinate you can’t avoid this mess, but try your best not to get in his way, okay?”

“How about even pretending to sympathize with me first?” Iku pouted.

“She’s like a dog, isn’t she.”

Doujou’s expression turned bemused as he heard Tedzuka’s abrupt declaration. Doujou and Komaki sometimes got together in one of their rooms and got drunk, but lately Tedzuka had begun to join them.

“Where did that come from?” Though Tedzuka hadn’t named names, Doujou knew who he was talking about, so he didn’t bother to ask.

“Like today. She was like a hunting dog or something when you told her to chase those kids, Officer Doujou. She’s stupid fast.”

“Oh, I see,” Komaki nodded. “Like a pointer or a setter, some dog like that. The ones that are all leg.”

“Hell, it was the first time I’ve ever been outrun by a girl,” Tedzuka grumbled. Lately he had become slightly more relaxed around his superiors.<sup>14</sup> He also got into fewer fights with Iku, and he seemed a little less rigid and inflexible than he used to be. The change in him was probably due to Iku’s influence.

“That’s because for a girl she’s got a nonstandard pair of legs.”

“Is that why?” Tedzuka asked. He sipped his beer, then made a face. Apparently the can was empty.

“Is that why what?”

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<sup>14</sup> In Japanese, this sentence said, “Lately Tedzuka had stopped referring to himself as *jibun* around his superiors.” As you may recall from a previous footnote, *jibun* is more humble and polite than the pronoun *ore*, which he uses in this conversation.





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“When you gave the order to capture the suspects, you only called Kasahara’s name. Even though I was right there too.” Tedzuka tried to hide the despondence in his voice, but some of it leaked through anyway.

Doujou didn’t remember exactly how he had worded his hasty order, but if that was what Tedzuka had heard, it must be so. “Since you were both right there, it didn’t matter which of you I called, did it?”

“Is Kasahara the one you call on the spur of the moment, not me?” Tedzuka sounded even more despondent. Doujou was at a loss for words. If he told Tedzuka whose name he called instinctively, Tedzuka would press him for the reason.

“Since it was the spur of the moment, he called the name he’s more used to, right? Doujou has lots of practice yelling at Kasahara-san.” Komaki was throwing him a life preserver.

“I certainly didn’t call her name because I have more faith in her than you.” Doujou nodded vaguely, grabbing onto Komaki’s life preserver for the time being.

“Gotcha,” Tedzuka murmured, rising. He wasn’t drunk enough to wobble on his feet yet, so his complaints probably hadn’t just been pointless quibbling. “I’m going to go buy more beer,” he announced, and left the room.

“You owe me,” Komaki laughed. “Well, for better or for worse, Tedzuka’s pretty self-assertive.”

“Or Kasahara won him over to her school of immaturity,” he grumbled, still ill at ease from the sudden interrogation.

“But I think he’s become more honest. Before, it was like he wouldn’t even admit to himself that he took notice of Kasahara-san. Lately they’ve been getting along pretty well.”

*That’s because he asked her out or something,* Doujou thought about replying, but he didn’t know if Tedzuka had talked about that with Komaki. It didn’t appear that they had ended up dating, but it was possible that they were hiding it, or still “in negotiations,” so it was best not to mention things he shouldn’t.

Or think thoughts he shouldn’t.

“A dog is such a fitting comparison for her, isn’t it?” Komaki murmured, though it would probably anger Iku to hear herself described such. “Their tails give away everything they’re thinking. If you were such a straightforward and predictable fastball, you’d just *have* to adjust, or maybe you couldn’t stand not adjusting...I don’t know. Perhaps I should ask Doujou-san, who had to learn how to throw a curveball?” Doujou ignored his blatant teasing. “Well, good luck tomorrow, sensei. You’ll be in command of three children, after all.”

Doujou sipped his beer, reflecting in surprise that Komaki too was quite unreserved





when the subject of the conversation wasn't present.

★

“These are the two boys who pulled the fireworks prank.”

Doujou motioned to Kimura Yuuma and Yoshikawa Taiga, who were sitting between him and Iku, and they bowed their heads. Opposite them was the chairman of the Committee for Reflection on Sound Child-Rearing. She was a middle-aged woman who just tipped the scales from plump to heavy. Iku remembered her from her many visits to the library for assemblies and demonstrations. She seemed like the type of mother who was zealously obsessed with her children's education.

It had been Genda's suggestions to first go and apologize to the Committee for Reflection for the fireworks incident. “Rule #1 of grown-up fights: Minimize your own weaknesses,” he had said, grinning. Of course, then he had passed the chaperoning duties to Doujou wholesale. “If I went, they wouldn't be able to tell if we were apologizing or threatening them,” he protested, using his appearance as an excuse, and no argument was possible. As for Komaki, he had made his escape by stating, “A hard-nose type like Doujou appeals more to those kind of people.”

Iku's attendance was also Genda's idea. His reason? “A woman's presence makes for a more harmonious atmosphere.” “Will it really work if the woman in question is a member of a combat group?” Tedzuka had asked skeptically. He should have minded his own business.

Before they visited the office of the Committee for Reflection, one stop away in the town of Mitaka, Doujou ordered her not to speak. He was apparently more worried about verbal slips from Iku than from the children. “Then you should have brought Shibasaki instead, she performs flawlessly no matter what circumstance you throw her into,” Iku replied sullenly. “You'll do fine if you keep your mouth shut. Do you want to needlessly burden another division?” was Doujou's curt response. “Just do as I said!”

Iku complied, and was meek and quiet throughout the encounter. Doujou carried the conversation by himself.

“The boys have done a lot of reflecting, and they insisted that they had to apologize...” Doujou glanced at Yuuma and Taiga, and they bowed in perfect unison like trained animals.

“We're very sorry!”

The boys looked like serious types, and the chairman's formerly displeased expression softened a little. “Well...they're only children. No one was hurt, so there's no need to make a big fuss about it. But I think that some sort of guidance is in order.”



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“On that topic...” Doujou pounced on this opening. “We contacted and consulted with the boys’ parents and their school, and after some consideration, we hit upon the idea of giving them a little societal education.” This was all true. Yesterday Genda had called the parents and the school and settled everything. “What about having them form a study group and participate in the upcoming forum? We’ll put these two in charge, and they’ll start it up and manage it. They’ll do independent study on the problems facing the library, and through it learn about the value and responsibilities of societal activities. We feel that would encourage the children’s autonomy and personal growth much more effectively than a perfunctory reflective essay or a suspension from school.”

This proposal was twice as effective coming from Doujou, the very picture of a serious, strait-laced type. The role-call of the Committee’s favorite buzzwords—“value,” “responsibility,” “personal growth”—didn’t hurt either.

“That would be a worthwhile experiment.” The chairman nodded indulgently and bent down to address Yuuma and Taiga. “Now remember, you mustn’t abandon a position of responsibility once you’ve assumed it.”

The two replied in unison again, and the chairman seemed very impressed with them. When they left she bid them a good-natured farewell; a radical departure from her earlier behavior.

At the coffee shop in front of the Mitaka station where they stopped on the way home from the Committee’s office, Doujou fixed the children with a stern glare. “This is the point of no return. If you start waffling now, I will smack you down.” It would be a huge loss of face for the library if the children backed out after Genda’s plan had been put in motion. It was not something the Library Task Force—not to mention the faction that supported the library’s principles—was in a position to do, after they had forced such a late revision to the schedule.

“We’re not gonna quit,” Taiga said, cheerfully sipping his orange juice. “Next is Rule #2 of grown-up fights.”

Genda’s Rule #2 was “Gather a number of allies and make them your strength.” His bald-faced explanation was, “An opinion gains prestige when it has more people behind it.” He had ordered the two to gather a group of students who opposed increased regulations on books, under the guise of a study group. “A group looks more legitimate if it has a name, even one that’s brand-new,” Genda continued, becoming more blunt the more he went on. But the children found his frankness refreshing, and adored their “Commander” to an unbelievable extent, considering how much he had frightened them in the beginning.

“I anticipate the endorsement of a great number of students,” Yuuma pronounced with a self-satisfied look, pouring a double helping of milk and gomme syrup into his iced



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coffee. By now it was the same color as an iced café au lait. “There are many others besides we two who harbor discontent over the restrictions on books. They are silent now simply because they have no way to express that discontent to the Committee for Reflection. I believe that those who desire the freedom to read as they please are in the majority. It has come to my attention that discontent is smoldering at other schools as well; perhaps our student council could coordinate with the student councils at those schools and form an alliance.” His eagerness was inspiring him to talk even faster.

“Can you really get the student council to act?” Iku asked, wincing inwardly in embarrassment over his manner of speaking.

Taiga answered her. “He’s in the student council. Right now he’s just the secretary ’cause he’s an eighth-grader, but everyone thinks he’ll be president next year.”

“Really!?”

“What do you mean, ‘really?’” Yuuma asked, frowning.

“Oh...nothing,” Iku lied, sipping her black tea. “*Congratulations on gathering enough votes in spite of your incredibly affected manners*” was something she just couldn’t say to the proud Yuuma.

“Since you don’t have a lot of time, restrict your dealings with other schools to gathering signatures or something like that. Better to limit the membership of your group to students at your own school.”

“Understood. If we collapsed from spreading ourselves too thin in our limited time scale, we would lose everything. We’ll go the secure route.”

Yuuma and Taiga had drained their glasses during the conversation, and were becoming fidgety.

“Would you excuse us? Since we don’t have very much time, we’d like to begin as soon as possible, now that we have some ideas.”

Doujou nodded. “Be sure to follow Commander Genda’s orders,” he added.

“I understand,” replied Yuuma, already rising from his seat. “Respecting the chain of command is one of the basics of wartime strategy.”

*Wartime strategy!?* His exaggerated language caused almost physical discomfort. Iku shifted in her seat.

“Please excuse us. We’ll be in touch anon.” Yuuma sketched a bow, then calmly picked up the check.

“Leave it,” Doujou commanded.

Yuuma gave what he imagined to be a grown-up smile. “Please let me take care of this. My mother always told me never to let someone treat me after I had caused trouble for them. I receive an allowance for meal expenses, so please don’t worry yourselves.”

This was the last straw. After the children left, Iku let her head droop in dismay.



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Addressing Doujou, who was sitting across from her looking untroubled, she asked, “Aren’t you mortified for him, Instructor Doujou?”

“Of course I’m mortified,” he answered immediately, but he certainly didn’t appear to have taken any damage to speak of.

“Every time Yuuma says something, I’m so embarrassed I could faint. He’s so over-the-top!”

“Thanks to you, I’ve grown used to seeing people embarrass themselves.”

*What do you mean, “thanks to me?”* she wondered, given Doujou a look of dubious befuddlement.

Doujou declared innocently, “Your prince was probably pretty embarrassing himself.”

“Noooooooooooo!” she howled and pounded on the table as if to drown out Doujou’s voice.

“What the hell kind of idiot are you!?” Doujou cried, in a panicked attempt to get Iku under control. He gave an embarrassed bow to their glaring neighbors. But Iku didn’t have attention to waste on other people.

“How dare you dredge up something like that on purpose! It’s sexual harassment!”

“Don’t yell out slanderous accusations like that!”

Doujou’s genuine desperation caused her to recover her composure slightly. *Aha, maybe I can win that way*, she thought, and tried pushing a little harder while she had the upper hand.

“Isn’t it sexual harassment, sir, to discuss a subject someone finds embarrassing?”

“Now you’re just doing it on purpose. I’m not listening anymore.” He had recovered and rebuilt his defenses quickly. Iku clucked her tongue. Now that she couldn’t bait him anymore, she was forced to confront her own regrets.

“Please just forget about that as soon as you can. It was the biggest verbal slip of my life.”

“Don’t worry. You’re embarrassing enough as a whole, even excluding that incident.”

“Arg, you sound like Shibasaki! Dammit!” she spat, but the mention of Shibasaki suddenly reminded her of a certain bomb she could drop. “Speaking of Shibasaki, I heard she asked you out?”

Doujou stiffened for an instant at that—bull’s eye.

“Why did you refuse her? Her personality’s got a few problems, but she’s not bad as girls go.”

“It’s none of your business,” he replied flatly.

—*why does that sting so much?* Somehow she was the one who had ended up getting hurt, and it disturbed her.

“...it *is* my business. Shibasaki is my friend, more or less.”



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“Then you can ask Shibasaki all about it. It’s none of your concern whom I go out with or whom I refuse.” *Ouch! No, no, why am I taking this so hard?* “Besides, I haven’t said a word about you guys and your relationship.”

The sudden change of subject completely overrode her previous agitation. “You guys and your relationship? What do you mean? Me and who?”

“I don’t care if you go out, or if you’re already going out—you and Tedzuka, I mean.”

“We’re not!” she snarled forcefully, causing Doujou to look a little unnerved. “That was a total misunderstanding spawned by that idiot Tedzuka and some harebrained idea of his! He asked me out, pro forma, even though he had no feelings for me, because our superiors told him to ‘warm up to me’! And I was agonizing over it for so long!”

“...is Tedzuka even more of an idiot than I thought?”

“I just wish I could do an investigation to find out just which one of our superiors was responsible for planting such an ill-conceived hint in that idiot’s mind! Never give a careless order to such a literal-minded moron!”

Doujou flinched back from Iku’s threatening tone. “You don’t have to go that far,” he protested weakly. “Surely he wouldn’t have been a bad guy to go out with.”

“Sorry, but I have high ideals. Tedzuka really doesn’t measure up.”

“*Tedzuka* doesn’t measure up?” Doujou asked, shocked.

“Well, after all, I met my prince already in high school,” she said self-mockingly, defiantly seeking victory that way. “Tedzuka’s no match for him. He was so cool.” Iku could talk about that Library Force member for hours. “When I got in that scuffle with the Improvement trooper and no one could lift a finger to help me, he appeared like a champion of justice and saved me. He took the confiscated books as his discretionary selection, but he let me keep mine. He told me a few would be given back anyway.”

“It was against the rules for him to decide by himself to exercise our right of discretionary selection,” Doujou snapped in irritation. *Rules, rules, rules! You sound like Tedzuka!* Iku sulked.

“But wasn’t it admirable? He had a kind heart, on top of being cool. He was the perfect Library Force member. He makes a stark contrast to a certain inflexible someone.” As she spoke, she remembered the commotion that had taken place during her guard rotation training. It was painful for her to recall the way she had been humiliated by the Improvement troops for not knowing that she didn’t have the right of discretionary selection, but—“Anyway, wasn’t that you who told me to give that girl’s book back to her? That time I got in the fight with the Improvement troops.”

Doujou’s chagrin was plain to see. His face practically screamed, *Don’t think about things like that!* She almost never got the opportunity to pull his tail, and it was fun. She redoubled her attack.



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“When faced with the same situation, even you do the same thing, don’t you, Instructor?”

“That was different! There was a child involved! Besides, I wasn’t the one who went in there and waded around my right of discretionary selection! I was cleaning up the mess that some idiot made while brashly selecting books in spite of being just a Librarian First Class!”

*Salt in the wound! I told you to stop dredging things up!* Iku grumbled to herself.

“If it were me, I wouldn’t be just waving around my selection rights as I pleased. So it would be impossible for me to be faced with the same situation as that guy,” he asserted stubbornly, then shot a glare at Iku. “Except when some idiot subordinate creates it for me.”

*Oh? Meaning, basically, that if a subordinate created the situation first, he can be pretty flexible?* She didn’t say this out loud, but tucked the knowledge away carefully, as a trump card.

“So if I was a high-schooler and had a book taken away from me and you were there, you wouldn’t save me?” she pressed.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Doujou shot back. Was that stubbornness creeping into his voice? “You wouldn’t do all kinds of stupid things in blind imitation of him if he hadn’t made an unauthorized selection in front of an impressionable dimwit like you in the first place. And if that kind of heroic-sounding story gets spread around, the library would be criticized whenever it didn’t interfere, even when noninterference was the correct route. It would cause a lot of trouble for good, upstanding Library Force members.”

He was right, but Iku blindly reacted against Doujou’s deliberate, sharply-worded argument. Of course his actions might cause problems, but there must also be many Library Force members who would sympathize with that man. Didn’t they join the Library Force because they wanted to protect books? Not to mention—“But, if you had been the one in the bookstore with me that day, I wouldn’t have wanted to join the Library Force!”

She chose the most stinging words she could think of—turnabout was fair play—but she regretted them the moment they left her lips. Because for a split second, Doujou looked like he had been slapped.

*Huh? Why does he look so hurt? He was the one who started the fight! He was the one who was disparaging my prince!*

She was angry and confused, and suddenly couldn’t stop herself.

“I only decided to join the Library Force after I met that man. I wanted to protect books too, just like he did. I think any kid who loved books who saw him in action would think the same thing. They wouldn’t want to join the Force if they saw you, Instructor Doujou, or any of the other good, upstanding Library Force members. A Force member who would remain silent and abandon a child whose book had been taken away—you can’t call him





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cool, you can't strive to be like him, you can't fall in love with him!"

She was going too far and she knew it, but she couldn't stop. And her tangled feelings only increased when the word "love" popped out of her mouth.

"I only met him once, five years ago, but even now I want to be like him, I respect him, and I love him. I want to meet him one day. If I did, I would tell him, 'I've come this far because I was chasing you.' You may scoff at him, Instructor, but could *you* get someone to strive after you like that?"

*You'll come to my rescue, you'll teach me, you'll support me, so why won't you be more like that man? You made me think I wanted to surpass you, so why won't you align with him?*

*I can't run after you both at once if you're not going in the same direction.*

"Please don't mock him." *Because I want to strive after you too*, she didn't add. Doujou handed her a paper napkin from the table, and she realized she was crying.

"I'm sorry. I won't do it any more. Don't cry." The apology was delivered like a three-part syllogism. Iku blew her nose hard into the napkin. "That's why I wouldn't lend you a handkerchief," Doujou grumbled. *Mea maxima culpa*, she wanted to snap, but hadn't recovered enough composure.

The glares of their neighbors must be ten times worse than before, now that he had made a woman cry, but it looked like Doujou was going to forgive Iku without requiring an apology.

He was nice that way sometimes.

Taking advantage of his kindness, Iku sniffled for a while. When she had recovered, Doujou opened his mouth. "A word of advice." Iku's voice was still thick from crying, so she merely raised her eyebrows. Doujou continued bluntly. "It would be better if you stopped calling Yuuma embarrassing. You're more embarrassing than he is without trying. Take your monologue just now, for example."

Without a word, Iku collapsed face down onto the table.

Waiting for her teary eyes to clear, they returned to the Library Base and went up to the Task Force office, intending to report to Genda. They found him busy with a visitor. It was a woman—at a glance, she seemed to be around Genda's age. They weren't using a reception room, so this wasn't a hyper-formal visit, but they didn't interrupt and returned for the time being to their respective desks.

She sat writing her daily report and doing other tasks for awhile, then—

"Kasahara-san?"

She turned at the unfamiliar voice calling her name and was blinded by a sudden flash. She instinctively averted her face, and then heard the sound of someone rising furiously from a chair.





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“Doujou, she’s a friend of mine. Don’t worry.”

When her dazzled vision had recovered, Doujou was sitting back down with a dangerous expression on his face, and the female visitor from before was standing in front of her, smiling, a digital single-lens reflex camera in hand. She was wearing a battered cameraman jacket, but had a polished air in spite of it. She was quite a beauty. Shibasaki might resemble her when she reached middle age.

“When I heard that the first woman had been accepted to the Task Force, I pictured a forbidding bear of a girl, but she’s such a sweet young lady. I was surprised.”

“Erm, why did you take a picture...?” Iku asked with undisguised suspicion.

The woman pulled a business card case from one of her many pockets and gave one to Iku. ‘*New World Weekly*, Editorial Department Chief, Orikuchi Maki,’ it said. The name printed in the right corner was that of one of the two major weekly magazines.

Orikuchi Maki checked the picture in the camera’s LCD screen. “Good, very nice,” she muttered. “Shall we take one more?” She raised her camera. As Iku flinched away in alarm, Doujou thrust himself between them. He might be shorter than Iku, but he provided more than enough cover for her seated form. She gratefully accepted his protection.

“Due to special circumstances, she can’t have any media exposure. Please erase the first picture too.”

Iku stared up at Doujou. *Special circumstances? Can’t have any media exposure?* Apparently he was taking the situation with her parents into account.

“Hey now, I don’t remember authorizing an investigation here,” Genda walked over and cheerfully thwarted her.

Orikuchi tsked and fiddled with her camera. “She was so photogenic too.”

Iku was faintly pleased to hear it, but she was afraid of her parents seeing her picture if it were in a major weekly magazine. There was nothing like the transmission of information through the backcountry intelligence network. If it was seen by a friend of a friend of a friend, it was certain that the information would make the rounds to Iku’s home.

“Commander, who might this person be?” Doujou asked curtly. Orikuchi handed him a business card. He took it, but his expression remained grim. Doujou’s strong feelings of responsibility towards his subordinates could be relied upon in times like this.

“She’s a friend from my college days. I can vouch for her background. She’s a reporter for *New World*, just like it says. She’d like to write an article about the tightening of restrictions on books from the opposition’s point of view, so she’s going to cover the upcoming forum.”

“You mean, you browbeat me into covering it, Genda-kun.” Orikuchi pouted in complaint. “Children participating in the forum and learning about society; it’s all so heartwarming. Not my usual style at all.”

“We’ll put you in a mascot character costume. The disguise will hold even if you kill



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someone violently. You agreed to this readily enough; I don't want to hear complaints now. Besides, you would have covered it anyway, right?" His irreverent reply made it clear that they had an easy-going friendship.

"Well, personally, I'd also like to cover the progress of a woman through the Task Force..." Orikuchi said, then looked at Doujou and laughed. "Just kidding. Her guard dog is scary, so I'll let it go this time."

Doujou's expression turned grim at being called a 'guard dog.' Iku's blood ran cold, even though it wasn't directed at her. Iku could surely never follow suit and liken Doujou to a dog, even as a joke.

"So, where are these children?"

Doujou glared and didn't answer. Iku, glancing at his face, replied, "They've gone home for today. I think they've gone to gather members for their study group."

"Good, good, they're enthusiastic little munchkins," Genda said, looking very pleased.

Orikuchi, frustrated in her journalistic pursuit, frowned slightly, but said, "Oh well, I'll start by investigating the surrounding circumstances," making a flexible transition to a new task.

Iku and Doujou, after reporting the particulars of the children's apology, rejoined the security team keeping watch on the demonstrators.

★

The next day was Monday, and a lecture hall in one of the library's public buildings was opened for the use of the children's study group.

The children arrived after school. Iku went to sneak a peek at them during a break between indoor patrol shifts. Counting Yuuma and Taiga, there were more than ten children gathered there; it was an impressive mobilization on one day's notice. Yuuma, as president, was presiding over the discussion of the content of a survey that would be delivered to every middle school in the city. He was simultaneously speaking and adding items to a list on the whiteboard. His handwriting was neat and easy to read, as might be expected from a student council secretary. In a corner of the room sat Orikuchi, doing research for her article. Since Orikuchi would probably flag her down if she saw her, Iku chose a place out of her line of sight from which to observe the proceedings.

"This is the draft I wrote up for the survey. I think these are the questions we need to have, at a minimum. What do you think?"

"Aren't there a lot of them? Twenty might be too many," a girl objected.

Yuuma looked affronted. "If we omit too many questions, our point will lose its



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potency.”

“Isn’t it the other way around? Our point will get lost if we have too many meaningless questions, and anyways it’ll be a pain to count up the results. Why don’t we stop at ten?”

The battle had begun.

“For starters, we don’t really need the question about ‘what’s your favorite book?’, do we?”

“We need it to explain student’s reading preferences to the Committee for Reflection.”

“But like I said, we won’t be able to tally them all. There’s only two weeks until the forum.”

“But we need data to point to when we explain what kind of books children like.”

“But grown-ups aren’t going to recognize the books by their titles anyway. Not unless they’re ‘classics.’”

“We can give a short description of the most popular books.”

“But I’m trying to tell you, there’s no point. It’ll take a ton of time and effort, but anyone who sees the results will just go, ‘huh’ and move on.”

Yuuma appeared to be losing.

“If you think about the effort of having to count them up later, it’s definitely better if we have fewer questions.”

“Also, Kimura, there are too many free answer questions. How are we supposed to tally those?”

“How are we supposed to get anything done if you’re reluctant to expend any effort!?”

“The practical problem is that we don’t have time! Get in touch with reality!”

It was a clash between the pragmatists and the idealists. *Just another day in the life of a middle schooler*, Iku thought, watching benignly.

Yuuma, standing at the front of the lecture hall, turned to Orikuchi in the back and dragged her in. “Miss Reporter, who do you think is right!?”

*He’s such a kid!* Iku smiled bitterly. They had lost their focus, and turned the discussion into a competition.

“Oh, do you really think it’s something an outsider should be getting involved with?” she asked in jest, not actually intending to put them off. “I think both sides have a point; can’t you fuse them and come to some sort of compromise?”

Yuuma looked very reluctant over Orikuchi’s proposal. He was consumed with competitiveness, and was dissatisfied with this lack of definitive arbitration.

“If I were to give you one hint, it would be this: You all think of this survey as very important, but the students who will be filling it out are under no obligation to think so



themselves.”

Yuuma was finding it hard to accept this dose of reality. “But this is a fight for their own rights. We’re acting as their representatives, but this concerns those other students as well. They have to accept this as their problem and reflect on it; they have to cooperate with us.”

“Yup, you’re absolutely right, it’s a very noble argument. But a noble argument is a pain in the ass.”

*Should she be that blunt with a child?* Iku wondered, listening avidly from the hallway. Yuuma was standing at the front of the room with a hurt, shocky expression on his face. For better or for worse, Orikuchi’s statement sounded like deliberate mockery to the innocent children. Even the girls Yuuma had been arguing with looked a little disturbed and uneasy.

“If something’s a pain in the ass for someone, it’s not like you can tell their ass to stop feeling the pain. And there *will* be people who think the survey is a pain, I can guarantee you. Instead of grumbling about how people *have* to cooperate with you, wouldn’t it be more constructive to think of ways to elicit cooperation from the uncooperative? When you’re asking for help from strangers with no obligation or relationship to you, people who naively think ‘They must help us,’ or ‘Of course they’re gonna help us’ will undoubtedly fail. Cooperation isn’t something you can expect or demand, it’s something that you have to work to obtain.”

Orikuchi’s tone was gentle, but her words were harsh. Now the other children, not just Yuuma, were looking vaguely hurt. Pointing out that the other schools might not be so eager to help was like dumping a bucket of cold water over them.

*But come on, Yuuma, think!* Iku watched impatiently. *Listen! Commander Genda’s ‘grown-up fights’ operate on the same logic!* Thinking about it, she suddenly realized. Genda and Orikuchi might seem like Beauty and the Beast at first, but they were actually very alike. Especially the way they were blunt and outspoken regardless of the circumstances. Genda had said that they were friends from school, but Iku wondered, her curiosity sparking, if that was really all there was to it. If she were Shibasaki, she might actively sniff around and seek the answer, but Iku didn’t have that kind of insatiable drive.

She was a little worried about the outcome of the children’s dispute, but wouldn’t do to stick around forever. Iku quietly disengaged and walked away.

On the stairs, she met Taiga, who was carrying a heavy-looking shopping bag. “Hello,” he greeted her cheerfully.

“What are you doing out here? Everyone’s in the middle of a big debate.”

“Oh, I’m not good at debating. I can never find the right words to get my point across, so it’s just a pain in the butt for me. So I thought I’d make myself useful and go buy some



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juice. I'm sure not going to be any help otherwise."

"I see..."

She nodded absently, and then suddenly it hit her.

"...wait. You can be of help. In fact, you're just who everyone needs right now."

Iku grabbed Taiga's hand and dragged him back to the children's meeting.

Yuuma was completely at a loss.

After Orikuchi had said her piece and left, the girls who had been advocating for a simpler survey began to talk about not distributing it to other schools at all.

"If it's just going to seem like a pain to them, we shouldn't do it in the first place." Orikuchi's argument had given ammunition to the conservative faction.

"The whole thing is meaningless if we don't distribute the survey widely enough. If we only have data from our own school, our position will be weak. An opinion gains prestige when it has more people behind it."

Yuuma was borrowing words from Genda, but the girls were stubborn.

"But I hate it when people think I'm being a pain." "I don't want people to think we're annoying."

Iku burst in just as the argument was heading towards a stalemate. Yuuma blinked at her energetic entrance, trailed by Taiga with his juice.

"Listen up, everyone!" she shouted. Wondering what she was up to, all the children turned to look at her. Once she had their attention, she turned to Taiga. "Taiga, repeat what you just said to me."

"Huh?" Taiga said, looking like he wanted to flee. Iku pushed him to the fore. Taiga was enthusiastic when it was time to act, but it was hard for him to express his opinions, so he was quite bewildered—and not a little annoyed.

But Iku didn't seem to care.

"Taiga, why was it that you were running errands?"

"Um, like I said. It was the only way I could make myself useful."

"No, you said something else too."

"Huh...?" Taiga's eyes unfocused like he was trying to remember. "Because I'm not good at debating."

"Why aren't you good at debating?" Iku pressed.

Taiga gave her a gloomy look. "Come on, I just said. I can never find the right words so it's just a pain in the butt."

*A pain in the butt.* The words Orikuchi had left them with. Yuuma's expression grew serious in sudden understanding.

"Orikuchi-san wasn't telling you to give up just because you'd be a pain in the butt."



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Apparently Iku had been eavesdropping on that exchange. Yuuma grew slightly amused—*eavesdropping, even as an adult?* “There are people who will help you even if they think it’s a pain. Like, you know how you can donate to disaster relief just by calling a number? It would be a huge pain if you had to go to the bank specifically and transfer money to them, but a ton of people will help if all they have to do is make a phone call. All Orikuchi-san was saying was to aim for that level of pain-in-the-buttness.”

It didn’t bother Yuuma to state his opinions, but it was agony for Taiga. If they had too many free answer questions, they would lose the people like Taiga, who agreed with them but had a hard time expressing their thoughts.

And, too, when the girls had called tallying the results a “pain,” they were only willing to meet halfway when it came to expending effort. “*How are we supposed to get anything done if you’re reluctant to expend any effort!?*”, he had asked, but it was also a mistake to expend too much. They should be focusing their efforts on creating a survey that was easy to answer. *It would be wrong to demand that the people filling out the survey do a lot of work just because we had to.*

“I understand, our premise itself was fallacious from the start.”

“While I’m at it,” Iku interjected, looking irritated. “Almost no adult uses the word ‘fallacious’ in normal conversation. And how many of your peers know what it means without thinking about it? Stop using big words to show off. It isn’t nice. People who are truly intelligent speak in a way that anyone could understand, using words that everyone knows.”

Yuuma had no reply for this rebuke. The observation “*It isn’t nice*” stuck in him like a knife. A few of the others looked similarly stricken.

“Let’s make a survey that could get Taiga on our side!” Hearing his name, Taiga jerked his head up, but Yuuma blithely continued. “We’ll make it a perfect fit for you. Tell us what kind of survey you would find easy to answer.” He then turned to the girls who had lost enthusiasm. “And let’s think of ways to make it easy for people to cooperate with us, and how to make ourselves not be seen as a pain.”

Everyone glanced around at each other for a bit, but little by little, voices began to rise in agreement.

“I think we should go with a humble approach. ‘Please, we need your cooperation!’ No, maybe more like, ‘We’d very much appreciate your cooperation.’”

“Yeah, ‘cause we’re the ones who are benefitting from their help.”

“We should ask a teacher or some other grown-up how we can keep from being a pain.”

Everyone turned to look at Iku. But Iku was suddenly shouting “I’m sorry!” in the vicinity of her collar.



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“I completely forgot! Librarian First Class Kasahara, now heading out to join up with the protest security team, sir!”

It seemed she had a small radio microphone attached to her collar. It wasn't clear whom she was talking to, but it *was* crystal clear that they were angry.

Iku finished her transmission, said, “Sorry, I have to go!” and ran pell-mell from the lecture hall. Evidently she had been berated to within an inch of her life. Probably by Doujou.

The children let out a howl of laughter after she departed.

“Even though she's a grown-up...!”

Since Doujou had warned her so thoroughly yesterday too when they went to apologize to the Committee for Reflection, it was clear that Iku had her moments of carelessness. However, Yuuma wasn't inclined to laugh with the others.

“Even so, she's definitely a grown-up. Moreso than we are, anyway,” he murmured.

The girls squawked with laughter. “Didn't look like that to us!”

*Go ahead and laugh*, Yuuma thought to himself.

It was those who laughed who were children.

### Survey Concerning Library Restrictions

1. What do you think about restrictions on lending library books to minors?  
a. I support them    b. I oppose them    c. I have no opinion
  
2. For those who answered “I oppose them” to Question 1, why do you oppose the restrictions? (Circle all that apply.)  
a. I wouldn't be able to read the books I want to read.  
b. I value my freedom to read whatever I want.  
c. I don't think the reasons behind the restrictions are valid.  
d. I rebel against any attempt to restrict my freedom.  
Other:
  
3. Do you think that reading fosters crime?  
a. Yes    b. No    c. I don't know
  
4. Have books had a negative influence on you personally?  
a. Yes    b. No    c. I don't know





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5. What do you think of restricting access to books, on the grounds that they foster crime? (Circle all that apply.)
  - a. I think it is the right thing to do.
  - b. I think even stronger measures should be taken.
  - c. I think it's pointless.
  - d. I feel disappointed at the lack of faith it implies.
  - e. I am suspicious of adults who don't have faith in children.
  - f. I wish people had more faith in children.Other:
  
6. If your favorite books were restricted, would you read the recommended books instead?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. If they were books I was interested in
  
7. If you have any more thoughts on lending restrictions or the high school serial murderer case, please share them here.

“What do you think about something like this, sir?”

He hadn't ordered them to report, but Yuuma brought Genda a draft of the survey nevertheless. Getting someone to look over their work for them—it was impressive if they had thought of it themselves. And even if someone else had suggested it, the fact that they had taken that advice was still impressive.

It was very wise that they had converted nearly all the questions to multiple-choice. They had also whittled down the number of questions. It was evident that they had thought hard about making the survey easy for the respondents.

“Very well thought-out,” Genda said with frank commendation. Yuuma swelled with pride. It seemed he and his friends had strained their brains to come up with the survey.

If it had one flaw, it was that it was perceptibly biased, but since the children were approaching the problem from the standpoint of opposition to the restrictions, a bit of bias could be tolerated. The acting director's survey from a while back during the uproar about releasing patron information had had a much more overt bias.

Only one thing was missing—



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“Better put in a question for the people who support the restrictions. Like, ‘why do you support them’ or something.”

Yuuma frowned. “Is it necessary?” His voice was openly disgruntled.

“It’s called balance, kid. After all, you’re going to be showing the survey results to the restrictions’ supporters. Balance the questions equally, even if it’s just for appearances.”

Yuuma suddenly smiled mischievously. “Is that another rule of grown-up fights?”

“Sure, we’ll call it Rule #3. ‘Manage your public image carefully.’”

“Understood, we’ll put that question in and finish up.”

“The building closes at seven. If it looks like it’ll take a while, save it for tomorrow.”

“We’ll be fine,” Yuuma said, flying out of the Task Force office. After watching him go, Genda turned to face the visitor’s desk. Orikuchi was sitting in the chair, tending to her camera. She had spent a long time with the children that day, so she may have made some sort of suggestion to them. No—Genda was convinced that she had. But it would have been ridiculous to confirm it and thank her for it, so he refrained.

“Do you think this’ll make a good article?”

“Well, I have a pile of source material. The rest depends on how the forum goes.” Orikuchi laughed. “I’m counting on you to make it turn out the way I want to write it.”

“Leave it to me. If you like, you can start writing already. The library is going to win this suit!”

“When did this become a trial?” Orikuchi laughed again, then murmured, “He never changes a bit.”

★

At the forum, the Committee for Reflection argued vociferously with the library to voluntarily implement the restrictions, citing educational problems as their justification, and the library was forced into a defensive position. The library’s advocates were all supporters of the library’s principles, Inamine being first among them. The proponents for the Committee for Reflection and the library were seated on opposite sides of a stage, so that they could debate head-to-head and be heard by the spectators in the audience.

The Library Task Force had assumed security duty for the large auditorium where the forum was being held. Iku, as a member of Doujou’s squad, was posted in the auditorium itself, mixed in with the audience members. It had been expected that the audience would consist mostly of Committee for Reflection members and mobilized library troops, but as it turned out, the number of ordinary citizens was surprisingly large. About half of the auditorium’s five hundred seats were filled. The reason for the unexpected windfall seemed to be that Yuuma and his friends had appealed to the schools and begged their guardians to attend.



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“It’s Rule #4 of grown-up fights,” Yuuma grinned. “You’ll be at a disadvantage if you don’t have as many lackeys as your opponent.” Genda’s training at work again.

Where was Genda, so sure already of their victory? Holed up in their security headquarters—if he showed his face, he would intimidate their guests too much.

“So—why is Shibasaki up there?” Iku cocked her head in puzzlement as she looked up at the stage from her post.

Komaki, whom she was partnered with, answered, “She was press-ganged into facilitating the debate. A woman both brave and beautiful—she sure is handy to have around.”

Shibasaki was following the progress of the debate, handing out materials and refilling water glasses as necessary, dedicatedly going about her work. Every so often a flash would illuminate the auditorium—probably Orikuchi.

The first half of the debate ended without either side budging an inch from their positions, and the next order of business was announced.

*“We will now hear a research report from a group of interested middle school students.”*

Applause rose from the floor as a few students, with Yuuma in the lead, left the wings and made their entrance on stage.

*I hope they’ll be okay*, Iku fretted, watching the stage. Even from this distance it was clear that Yuuma was nervous. He had a stiff manner and spoke in a stiff voice. There was not a trace of his usual loquacity.

“In order to consider the voluntary lending restrictions from a middle school student’s perspective, we conducted a survey among Musashino middle-schoolers. The number of valid responses received was 3,281. You can see the results in your handouts.”

The results of the survey were in the materials that had been handed out at the entrance. The hall was briefly filled with the sounds of paper rustling.

### **1. What do you think about restrictions on lending library books to minors?**

“Three percent answered ‘I support them,’ 82 percent answered ‘I oppose them,’ and 15 percent had no opinion. If you look at question 4, you’ll see that the participants who had no opinion told us that they have no interest in reading itself, therefore almost all of the students who read books oppose restrictions. Also, even among those who don’t read, a great number expressed opposition based on the belief that it was wrong for adults to restrict children’s reading liberties. I believe that this means that many view their right to read as a symbol of children’s independence and self-respect, and they value it even if they don’t exercise it.”

### **2. For those who answered “I support them” to Question 1, why do you**



**support the restrictions? (Circle all that apply.)**

“Among those who agreed, their consensus was ‘I don’t think that over-18 materials should be lent out, but I oppose the Committee for Reflection’s standards for restriction.’ Zero percent supported the Committee for Reflection’s standards for restriction.”

**3. For those who answered “I oppose them” to Question 1, why do you oppose the restrictions? (Circle all that apply.)**

“All respondents circled both ‘I wouldn’t be able to read the books I want to read’ and ‘I value my freedom to read whatever I want.’ The next most popular choice was ‘I don’t think the reasons behind the restrictions are valid.’ Quite a few people wrote their own supplementary opinions in the space provided; the most common were along the lines of ‘It doesn’t make sense to restrict access to books that even the Media Improvement Committee doesn’t censor,’ ‘The Committee for Reflection’s standards are self-righteous,’ ‘I doubt that any grown-up who’s not in the Committee for Reflection would support their standards,’ etc.

“Those who answered ‘I rebel against any attempt to restrict my freedom’ also added supplementary opinions. These included ‘They’re being too overprotective,’ ‘It won’t help us grow and become independent,’ etc.

“Other opinions included ‘The Committee for Reflection’s interference will instead damage the relationship of mutual trust between children and adults,’ etc.”

As the presentation continued, the Committee for Reflection’s audience section began to buzz with conversation. Compared to the violently aggressive demands made by the Committee for Reflection during the first half of the forum, this objective presentation of survey results by Yuuma and his group, even in voices flat from nervousness, appeared much more rational. The unaffiliated audience members were all listening intently.

“Stop this at once!”

The woman shouting from the stage was the Committee for Reflection’s chairman, the one Yuuma and Taiga had gone to apologize to. The children were shocked into silence by her outburst, and she seized this opportunity to lash out at the advocates from the library.

“Did you let the children participate in this forum just so that they could criticize the Committee for Reflection? This puppetry is unfair! I demand that the children leave immediately!”

“We allowed the children to participate on the condition that they come up with their arguments themselves. Some of our staff made suggestions based on the children’s goals, but



there is no truth to the accusation that the library guided their decisions.”

This prompt rebuttal came from Inamine—his communication with Genda, the instigator, was impeccable as usual.

“We never heard that this would be the kind of ‘participation’ we could expect!”

“Pardon me, but it sounds as though you wouldn’t have endorsed their participation if their presentation didn’t support the Committee for Reflection? *That* would be unfair. The important thing is that the children independently studied the issues of lending restrictions. It appears that they have more than achieved their goal of learning about the value and responsibilities of societal activities.”

As Inamine and the chairman continued their argument, hands began to rise in the section where the unaffiliated were seated. Shibasaki, without a moment’s pause, borrowed a microphone from one of the debaters on the library’s side, and announced, “It appears that the audience has some thoughts on the matter, so let’s hear from some of them!” Forcing the debate to a halt with her usual quick-wittedness, she descended from the stage and hurried over to the audience members with their hands raised.

The first man to take the microphone was a middle-aged member of the PTA. “As a parent, I would like to hear the children’s personal opinions out to the end. I wasn’t concerned about this lending restriction business before now, but if our children have spent so much time thinking about it, I think that as guardians we have no choice but to start thinking long and hard about it too.”

Applause broke out here and there, in expression of agreement with the speaker.

“We the Committee for Reflection are asking for the implementation of these restrictions based on the recommendations of the Board of Education. You mustn’t give the same weight to the ill-considered opinions of callow young children and the policies of the Board of Education. Do you think to criticize those policies?” The chairman’s rebuttal was suffused with irritation.

The man replied, “But as far as I could tell from their report, their survey questions and tallying methods were solid. I don’t think it’s the kind of childish opinion that you can dismiss as ‘ill-considered.’”

“The children in charge of this group are the same ones who threw fireworks into one of our gatherings for a prank! Are you saying you can trust children like that!?”

“Objection!” Iku cried out in unthinking response. She used her normal voice, but it resounded throughout the auditorium. She quivered as the entire audience turned around at once to look at her, but—

“Someone from the library has some thoughts on the issue?” Shibasaki summoned her with a suggestive smile. Her nervousness disappeared. Komaki gently pushing her, she began walking toward where Shibasaki waited. Shibasaki collected the microphone from



the man and met her.

“Yes, the children pulled a prank, but then they went to the Committee for Reflection and apologized properly! You accepted their apology yourself, didn’t you, Chairman?” Iku railed into the microphone Shibasaki was holding. On stage, the chairman trembled visibly. The audience buzzed with suspicion.

“Don’t parents tell their children, ‘if you apologize and mean it, you’ll be forgiven’? If you accept their apology and then turn around later and use their actions as ammunition to attack them, aren’t you just teaching them that there’s no point in apologizing in the first place!?”

The audience burst into applause. Shibasaki returned the microphone to the first man, who made a follow-up attack. “Wouldn’t you say it was ‘unfair’ to not mention that the children apologized?” He then looked up at the children on stage. “Please continue. We’ll hear out your opinions to the end.”

Yuuma nodded, and once again approached the microphone. “I’ve already discussed the results of question 4, the thoughts of those who had no opinion on the restrictions, so I’ll move on. Next...”

Iku listened to Yuuma’s voice as she made her way back to her post. Komaki greeted her with a smile. “Well played,” he complimented her. But since her outburst had been nothing but a conditioned reflex, Iku just gave him an awkward smile.

### **5. Do you think that reading fosters crime?**

“Twelve percent answered ‘yes,’ 63 percent answered ‘no,’ and 25 percent answered ‘I don’t know.’ The ‘yes’ respondents included those who said, ‘There might be a few people who have been influenced by books.’”

### **6. Have books had a negative influence on you personally?**

“Zero percent of respondents answered ‘yes,’ 92 percent answered ‘no,’ and 8 percent answered ‘I don’t know.’ Supplementary opinions given by the ‘no’ respondents included, ‘I read books because I want to be deeply moved, so I don’t think I’ll ever be negatively influenced by them,’ ‘I’ve read graphic books and found them cathartic, but I don’t think I would ever imitate them in real life,’ ‘I can keep fantasy separate from reality,’ etc. The people who answered ‘I don’t know’ said, ‘I haven’t been negatively influenced yet, but I don’t know.’”

### **7. What do you think of restricting access to books, on the grounds that they foster crime? (Circle all that apply.)**



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“The most popular choices were, in order, ‘I wish people had more faith in children,’ ‘I feel disappointed at the lack of faith it implies,’ ‘I think it’s pointless,’ and ‘I am suspicious of adults who don’t have faith in children.’

“Some of the people who answered ‘I think it is the right thing to do’ specified that they supported restrictions on those books that they could objectively agree that children should not be reading. However, that should not be taken as an endorsement of the Committee for Reflection’s standards for restriction.

“No respondent chose ‘I think even stronger measures should be taken.’”

### **8. If your favorite books were restricted, would you read the recommended books instead?**

“Zero percent said ‘yes,’ 42 percent said ‘no,’ and 58 percent said ‘If they were books I was interested in.’

“I think what we can take away from this question is that students who like to read chose the books they want to read themselves. We don’t read a book because it’s ‘good for us,’ we read because we want to enjoy a book we personally find interesting. I think reading is ‘good for us’ when we enjoy a book and it leaves a deep impression on us, or because we learn something from it, or things like that. Even if the books we wanted to read were restricted, we still wouldn’t end up reading the books adults want to make us read. So I think it’s meaningless to require us to read books that are ‘good for us.’”

### **9. If you have any more thoughts on lending restrictions or the high school serial murderer case, please share them here.**

“We received a lot of opinions here, but one of the most overwhelming was ‘I wish people wouldn’t think that just because a minor who liked graphic books and movies committed a crime, all children are going to do the same thing.’ Another common one was ‘I wish people would believe in children’s judgement and morals more.’

“Up until now, our school library highly valued student’s desires when purchasing books. Thanks to that, we could be moved and inspired in many different ways by reading. When the Committee for Reflection’s restrictions were implemented, a large part of that inspiration was taken from us. If the library implemented those restrictions too, our ability to enjoy books would be drastically reduced, since we don’t have much money to spend on them. We pray that the public libraries will protect our literary freedoms.”

The audience burst into applause after Yuuma’s concluding remarks.

After that, the debate resumed. The Committee for Reflection rallied and asserted





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the legitimacy of their demands for lending restrictions in increasingly forceful terms, but Inamine's words finally put a stop to this rhetoric.

"A library is not an extension of the schools, nor is it an agent of parental discipline. Of course, I do not deny that it assists with education, but I believe that offering an environment where children can choose books from an open and diverse collection aids in their development of self-reliance. I also believe that above all parents and guardians should be instructing their children on whether to stay away from frivolous works. Isn't pushing that task onto schools and libraries a dereliction of their duty as parents?"

Inamine did not raise his voice once during the debate; it was that very unflappability that was persuasive.

"Members of the Committee for Reflection, parents, I'd like you to think about how you can best fulfill your duties as our children's guardians. If you want our help to achieve that end, from offering our wealth of materials to suggesting books from our children's section, we will be unstinting in our cooperation."

After the forum had ended, and Iku and the others were in security headquarters preparing for the withdrawal, Yuuma and Taiga came to say their goodbyes.

"Thank you for everything," they said, both bowing.

Genda laughed. "It was a give-and-take. We got plenty of use out of you too."

Doujou frowned at Genda and his bald statement. "You're talking to kids!" he hissed, but Genda paid no mind.

"They fought a grown-up fight and pulled off a victory. How could we still treat them like kids?"

Yuuma and Taiga exchanged triumphant looks at Genda's pronouncement, then turned to Iku and bowed their heads. "Thank you for backing us up, Kasahara-san. We were happy you supported us."

*No, see, I was just snapping at them out of reflex!* Iku felt awkward and uncomfortable.

After the two went home, Doujou hit the bull's-eye. "You were just pissed off at the Committee for Reflection, weren't you?"

"I'm sorry." Iku slumped.

Doujou continued with a poker-faced expression. "I was right to bring you along for the apology." He muttered, "I couldn't have spoken out at a time like that." It was almost a self-recrimination.

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At the end of the forum, a survey had been handed out to the audience; the majority did not end up supporting the restrictions. On those grounds, as well as others, the Musashino First Library rejected the Committee for Reflection's demands for lending restrictions.



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There were also signs that the outcome in Musashino provided support for the other libraries in the Tokyo area.

Then, the week after the forum, the issue of *New World Weekly* with Orikuchi's article in it came out. The article was critical of the direction of the library lending restrictions debate—the children's participation in the forum had only fanned the flames—so it would probably serve to distract the Board of Education again.

The library had a subscription to *New World*, so on the day it came out, it was delivered to the First Library; however, an advance copy had already been sent the previous day from Orikuchi to the Library Task Force.

"Lemme see lemme see!" Shibasaki invaded the Task Force office during a break in her duties. Genda handed the magazine over to Iku and Shibasaki with good humor.

"You're the first to come and see it. It's a pretty good article."

"Where is it, where is it?" They flipped to a page that was marked with a sticky note and peered at it together.

"Oh, there's a picture of you, Shibasaki!"

They had used a photograph of Shibasaki refereeing the debate on the first page. She brightened the whole page. Shibasaki didn't seem to be surprised—maybe they had told her beforehand—but she seemed a little disgruntled.

"After I told them that my right side was my good side, too..."

Orikuchi's article maintained a neutral viewpoint, but as one read on, it naturally kindled sympathy for the library. It was an exquisite composition.

Turning the last page, Shibasaki cocked her head.

"Isn't that you?"

"What!?"

The picture Shibasaki pointed at was a small profile of her standing, taken from diagonally behind. The caption read, "A trooper working security at the event, where the library was harshly attacked. What must she be thinking inside?" The photograph was shot in soft focus, but it was undeniably a picture of her.

"It's a small picture, but don't you look dignified and brave! Not bad, not bad at all."

"I don't care about that! This is terrible, my parents might find out if they see this... Commander!" she scolded before she could stop herself.

Genda came over to look at the magazine. He saw the photographed and frowned. "Damn you, Orikuchi," he rumbled. "Doujou's going to be spitting nails, and I'm going to get the heat for it."

"You're worrying about yourself!? Come on, I'm the victim here, clearly!"

"It's not like they got a clear shot of your face. Play innocent if your parents ask you about it. If push comes to shove, I'll tell them the person writing the article misunderstood."



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‘She’s so huge that they took her for a security guard.’”

“Huge’!? I don’t need that kind of help, thank you very much!”

Genda ignored Iku’s rebuff. “Oh, I forgot, we had a phone call from the munchkins.” It was no use trying to get Genda to reconsider his words now that he had changed the subject. Iku slumped dispiritedly. “They’ve started the ball rolling on getting the restrictions lifted from their school library.”

Iku and Shibasaki exchanged a look. “Well done,” Shibasaki said first, smiling, and a grin split Iku’s face too.

“Glad you’re happy. Since I gave you good news, that makes us even, right?”

“What? No! They have nothing to do with each other!” she countered him.

At that moment, the door opened and Doujou came in. Genda, his face a mask of alarm, passed him and fled the room.

Doujou watched him go, a puzzled expression on his face. Shibasaki promptly showed him the magazine. As he scanned it, his expression grew grim.

“Commander! What is the meaning of this!?”

Watching Doujou fly out of the room in pursuit, Shibasaki turned to Iku with a mocking tone. “Overprotective as usual, isn’t he.”

“It’s because he’s got an overdeveloped sense of responsibility,” Iku replied lightly, then returned her gaze to the magazine.

The article was so good that she could forgive the photograph, but Genda’s “huge” comment had crossed the line, so she didn’t feel any duty to intercede on his behalf.

...still, it wasn’t a bad photo.

Her straight-backed figure did look quite dignified, if she did say so herself. *I wonder if I look that way to other people?* she thought. It gave her a good feeling to think so.



## Chapter 5

When the freedom of the library is violated, we librarians will unite and fight to the end to protect its freedom.

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The first charge was swift and overwhelming.

It didn't help that they had expanded into a new building last year, and their personnel were still inexperienced at deploying there. The attack was also just after closing time, when librarians and staff were still in the building, and both the evacuation and defense were disorganized and chaotic. Thus, not twenty minutes had passed since the first charge before the Hino Library's reference room was occupied and the staff had barricaded themselves inside the archives in the basement, under heavy fire from the enemy.

*'We are here to bring the iron hammer down upon the library, which to our despair treats antisocial books and worthy books as equals, and disrupts public order and morality!'*

As gunfire echoed artlessly like the sound of rain, a staticky, crackling voice outside was shouting through a bullhorn. Handguns had been part of the standard equipment for the security forces at the Hino Library for several years now, but the attackers were armed with shotguns and submachine guns, so they were no match for them in terms of firepower. Anyway, they were accompanied by a large number of non-combatant librarians and staff, so they had no choice but to fight defensively.

As the director of the library, Inamine was in command, but there was almost nothing he could do while under siege inside the basement. At that point in time, there were no dead or severely wounded, which helped.

"The police still aren't here yet!?" a security guard practically wailed, returning fire from the barricade that had been erected outside of the archives. They had contacted the police during the early stages of the raid, but the riot squad that would be required to suppress the attack still hadn't arrived.

"I'll try calling them again!"

A female staffer began to dial outside on the archives' telephone, but Inamine stopped her. They had demanded action again and again, but the police just kept telling them, "They're just leaving, they're just leaving," as if they had called a soba restaurant asking about the status of their delivery. Meaning the police didn't intend to intervene. According to the reports of the personnel who had come running from other branches, patrols had arrived and taken measures to seal off the area, but hadn't done anything more combative than that.

"From now on, don't use library phones to call the police! Get on your cell phones, pretend you live in the neighborhood, and demand that they come and put a stop to the fighting! Don't mention that you work at the library! And try not to let them hear any gunfire!"

Staff members with cell phones ran deeper into the archives to escape the noise. If they



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could hear gunfire from close by, the police would figure out that the call was coming from the library even without doing a phone trace.

The police's indifferent attitude toward the library was nothing new, but this time it was too much. The police had established a tradition of noninterference in the private war between the library and the Improvement Special Agency, but this raid was clearly the work of an unrelated group. The staff of the other branches had tried to explain this to the police patrols who had arrived, but for whatever reason—perhaps it was taking a long time to confirm—the police were still dithering.

Yet the very fact that they were setting up a perimeter meant that they had recognized that this wasn't an attack by the Improvement Special Agency. In their war with the library, the Improvement Special Agency took responsibility for any injuries among the citizenry. The laws had been interpreted to mean that the party actively attacking was responsible for any collateral damage. In accordance with this ruling, the Improvement Special Agency independently sealed off the surrounding area and established safety measures whenever they carried out an attack. They also notified the police—meaning that if the Improvement Special Agency were responsible for the attack, the police wouldn't have been dispatched to seal off the area in the first place.

But it was useless to tell that to the police patrols present.

“Honey...”

The word was spoken by Inamine's wife, who also worked at the library. Without needing to be asked, he handed her his cell phone; she didn't have one of her own. She headed deeper into the archives, already dialing the three-digit number.

“Haven't we gotten in touch with Tachikawa yet!?”

Tachikawa Public Library was equipped with the largest-caliber firearms of all the libraries near the city of Hino. They might be a match for the attackers' firepower. But in the confusion of the attack, the call for assistance had not gone out for some time, so the other libraries had been slow to respond. The Hino branch libraries were all poorly-equipped for a firefight, so they couldn't make a move either until they could link up with a team from one of the larger-scale libraries in the area.

The attacking group, whose name he had never even heard before, followed none of the rules of war. The Improvement Special Agency usually gave them time between the notification of a raid and the raid itself, and even if they carried out a surprise attack, there were established rules against attacking the civilian staff. But the staff who had tried to escape through the emergency exits had been shot at without mercy by these attackers. It was a miracle that no one had been killed.

“I got through to the reinforcements from Tachikawa! ETA twenty minutes!”



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“Same for the ones from Hachiouji!”

They could hold out that long, somehow. They wouldn’t be able to prevent damage to the reference room, but that was unavoidable.

“Keep calling the emergency medical services number<sup>15</sup> too, maybe they’ll start demanding the police step in!”

There had been a few injuries from gunfire, so they had called 119, but until the attackers were subdued, no ambulance could get through.

At that moment, the staff who had been phoning from within the archives came running back, coughing violently. “There’s smoke coming through the air conditioning ducts!”

The next moment, the staff member manning the outside line shouted, “They started a fire in the reference room! The blaze is visible from the farthest branch library!” This information was coming from teams at the branch libraries, waiting on high alert for reinforcements to arrive.

“Why aren’t the fire alarms working!? Or the fire suppression system!?” someone yelled accusingly. But from the fact that smoke was pouring out of the ducts, it was clear that the smoke ventilators that comprised their safety systems were completely down. Meaning that the enemy had taken control of the security room, disabled the safety systems—and then, started a fire.

It was too much. Everyone fell silent, including Inamine.

He had been prepared for considerable damage to the library’s collection. He had been prepared for plundering. But he had never dreamed that the violence would reach the level of destroying the safety systems and setting fire to the building. The group’s values were so skewed—talking about justice as they set fire to books—that it gave him vertigo to think about them.

*“Where they burn books, they will ultimately also burn people.”*<sup>16</sup> The old saying came to mind automatically.

“...Order the branch libraries to contact the fire department and cover our escape! We’re evacuating!”

He was very skeptical about how much cover the branch libraries could provide without reinforcements, but the smoke would get to them before reinforcements arrived.

“What about the books?!” a staff member pleaded. Inamine felt the same way. The expansion into the new building had allowed them fulfill their hearts’ desire and expand their collection; in particular, they had been given charge of a large number of precious

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15 Unlike America, Japan has two different emergency phone numbers: 110 for the police, and 119 for fire and medical emergencies.

16 Heinrich Heine, a German poet.





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local historical documents, currently stored in the archives.

“Forget about them!” It broke Inamine’s heart to say it.

When they emerged from the archives, the gunfire had ceased. Perhaps the smoke was rising upwards, but the basement wasn’t yet filled with it. It had been harder to breathe in the archives themselves, with the smoke pouring out of the ducts.

“Not that one.” Immediately after speaking, Inamine’s wife disappeared back into the archives.

“Give it up, let’s go!” His wife usually ignored his attempts to dissuade her at home, but in these circumstances, he couldn’t afford to wait indulgently for her as he usually did. “Hurry!” he shouted into the archives. She returned, carrying a book and coughing violently.

A security guard with a gun lead the way, and they all climbed upstairs, crouching low. When they reached the first floor, the smoke density increased dramatically.

“Breathe low to the ground! Crawl if you have to!” Inamine ordered, lowering his knees to the ground and shuffling forward. There was fire everywhere in the reference room—maybe they had doused it in gasoline—and they couldn’t get near the main entrance due to the force of the flames. Thick smoke hung low like rainclouds a meter above the floor. One breath of that smoke would probably cause one to pass out. The stooping crawl was quite painful for Inamine, who had suffered intense lower back pain ever since he had slipped a disk last year.

Driven by the flames yet unable to get up and run, only his thoughts were racing. Blasted by a hot wind, scorched by the fire, the exit that they would have already reached if they could have run for it seemed hopelessly far away.

There was little illumination—either the electricity was out, or the lights were obscured by the smoke. The only sources of light were the reflection from the fire and the emergency guide lights on the floor. Staff members following the guide lights collapsed from smoke inhalation one after the other, and picking them up and dragging them slowed the group’s progress even further.

They reached the emergency exit at last. The first few staff members threw open the door, and the smoke *whooshed* out with terrific force. People spilled out of the building and ran for the front.

Then one by one, those fleeing figures crumpled to the ground.

Inamine, who had remained in the building until the last, didn’t understand what had happened, but stood dumbfounded in the doorway. The staff members who were still on their feet fled back to the emergency exit they had just escaped from. The ones who had fallen either stayed where they were or tried to crawl back—until they were rescued and



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carried back by the other staff.

“Director, get down!” When a young librarian pulled him back, the sound of the barrage of gunfire, mixed in with the popping and roaring of the fire, finally penetrated his brain.

*What madness is this.* He had no words.

*To gun down people trying to escape from a burning building...*

When he came to his senses, he realized that his wife wasn’t inside. And that one of the still, fallen figures on the ground outside was holding a book.

“Director!!”

He shook off the voices and hands that tried to stop him. Not even bothering to duck down, he ran around to the front.

“STOP THIS AT ONCE!” he bellowed, drowning out even the roar of the fire. “You would kill people, for the sake of public order and morality!?”

*If that’s what justice is, justice is the ugliest concept in the world.* And just what did that make the Media Improvement Act, as the basis for this ugliness?

As if the force of his spirit itself was deflecting the bullets, Inamine marched some dozen steps without being hit. But just before he reached his wife, he lost his balance and collapsed, as though his right leg had suddenly disappeared from underneath him.

Beneath the shelter of his fallen body, he could hear his wife taking fast, shallow breaths. It was like the sound their pet cat had made on its deathbed, several years before.

*Sorry, I’ll move, I must be heavy,* he tried to say, but blood poured from his mouth instead of words. He knew his right leg had been shot, but apparently he had also received a bullet to the chest.

He lost consciousness while vomiting blood, still struggling to speak to his fallen wife.

When he regained consciousness, his right leg had been amputated halfway up the thigh.

Inamine had hovered on the boundary between life and death for a long time, due to massive blood loss and the damage to his lungs from the chest wound. His wife’s funeral had been held while he was still too weak to lift his head from the pillow. Because they had no children, his wife’s father had substituted for him as chief mourner.

There had been heavy casualties among not only the staff of the main library, but among the backup forces from the branch libraries who had tried to cover their evacuation. Twelve people were dead, to say nothing of the wounded.

The library’s entire collection had been destroyed, by a combination of the fire and the water used to douse it. The only book that remained was the one that Inamine’s wife had



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carried out herself. Inamine still had it, twenty years after the incident. It was stained with blood and couldn't be lent out, so it had been given to Inamine as a memento. The book was a volume of local history. It had been housed in the documents room at city hall, and it had taken Inamine long years of negotiations to acquire it for the library.

Rumors swirled about the Nightmare at Hino, as the incident had been named—rumors too detailed to be dismissed as false.

Rumors that the delay in police intervention had been due to pressure from the Media Improvement Committee.

The attackers were all turned over to the prosecutor's office and sentenced to appropriate punishments, but the investigation of the Media Improvement Committee, suspected to have aided them, suffered from a lack of hard evidence and was closed partway through.

After that, Inamine resigned as director of the Hino Library and poured his heart and soul into shaping the modern Library Force.

There was strong opposition to the idea of a Force whose purpose was to shed blood in order to protect books. Even in the present day, there were many who criticized Inamine for playing a major role in intensifying the library conflict.

*But would the people who criticize us protect our poor abused books for us? Would they shed their own blood to protect our books, in place of the poorly-equipped library staff? If we are to protect our books and our librarians, we have no choice but to arm ourselves more strongly.* This was how Inamine faced down opposition.

*"You would kill people, for the sake of public order and morality?"* People denounced Inamine with the same words he had used to denounce the Hino attackers. *You would kill people, for the sake of protecting books?*

He was never able to firmly state, *Yes, even if we kill people*, but Inamine was not proposing a pacifist system.

"Libraries oppose all censorship." It had been made abundantly clear that the library could not maintain that right guaranteed by the Law of Library Freedom with a pacifist strategy.

The Law of Library Freedom concluded, "When the freedom of the library is violated, we librarians will unite and fight to the end to protect its freedom." Inamine knew no way to protect the library's freedom except by fighting those who tried to violate it.

The same attack erupted at every turn: "Isn't this just your way of venting your grudge over the Nightmare at Hino?" He was also admonished, "Do you think your dead wife would have wanted this militarization?"

For the former, of course he bore a grudge. But he was sure that his grudge had nothing to do with his decision that the library must arm itself.



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As for the latter, not even Inamine knew what his wife would have thought, so the people who admonished him obviously could have no idea. Inamine had no answer for such hypothetical questions.

And then,

*“We despair of the library, which defies the Media Improvement Act and disdains order, morality, and human rights! In exchange for the lives of the hostages, we demand the destruction of the documents from the Museum of Information History!”*

When there were groups who attempted to suppress books with methods like that, there was no way that the library could give up the defense capability of the Library Force.

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The Museum of Information History, an incorporated foundation, had been an oasis of calm for thirty years.

Its chairman was Nobeyama Souhachi, a wealthy resident of Odawara. The Museum of Information History was his private library, its collection consisting mainly of books and film records that Nobeyama owned personally. It too was located in Odawara. To view the collection, one needed an advance appointment, and a trusted member needed to vouch for the visitor. The collection contained all kinds of magazines, newspapers, and recordings of television programs. More specifically, it contained a record of every piece of reporting ever done on the Media Improvement Act. As a library that kept records of the Act going back to before it was passed, it was well-known in both the library world and the journalism world. Not even the Media Improvement Committee’s agencies or the Ministry of Justice could ignore its existence.

As chairman of the conglomerate that owned Sesousha, the publishers of *New World*, and as a man who opposed the Media Improvement Act, Nobeyama established the Museum of Information History as an incorporated foundation soon after the Improvement Act was passed. Foreseeing a society where it would become difficult to criticize the Improvement Act, he gathered records of the media coverage of the Improvement Act up until that point, regardless of content, and had been doing the same thing ever since. This allowed him to maintain a front of neutrality, but his true purpose was to preserve journalistic records that would harm the Media Improvement Act, and in particular the systematic documentation of the transition the media had undergone since the Act was passed. Thus the historical value of the museum’s collection.

If it had been a public library, it would have been a prime target for attack by the Improvement Special Agency and supporters of the Improvement Act, but the Museum of Information History’s status as a private library made its position complicated.



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The Museum of Information History, as an incorporated foundation created from Nobeyama's collection, differed dramatically from a public library. If the Improvement Committee attempted to censor the contents of the Museum, it would be considered seizure of the foundation's property. As a private library, the Museum had the right of self-defense given by the Law of Library Freedom. On top of that, depending on the precedent, it was possible that the Museum had the right to sue the Improvement Committee.

(Incidentally, in the case of public libraries, their books were considered public property, and the Improvement Committee's right of censorship extended even to public property. Thus the libraries couldn't use legal means to prevent censorship, and had to invoke their right of book defense and resort to direct combat.)

In light of the fact that raiding the Museum of Information History carried the possible threat of legal action, and the fact that public access to the Museum was limited, the Media Improvement Committee half-intentionally ignored the Museum's existence.

As a result, the Museum of Information History possessed a large number of documents that the Media Improvement Committee was wary of, and had passed the thirty years since its founding in self-created peace.

Until one day in late October, when that delicate balance was upset.

### ***Former Nobeyama Group Chairman Nobeyama Souhachi Dies***

*Nobeyama Souhachi, the wonder consultant who chaired the Nobeyama Group and played a major role in its expansion from a general trading company to a diversified conglomerate, passed away on October 22 at 5:32 AM at an Odawara hospital. He was eighty-four. He hailed from Kanagawa Prefecture.*

*The funeral and farewell service will be held at the Nobeyama Funeral Hall at Azabu, in Tokyo's Harbor Ward, at 12 noon on the 26th. Leading the service will be Terazawa Taizou, director of the Nobeyama Group's public relations department. Nobeyama Masatomi, the deceased's eldest son and current chairman of the Nobeyama Group, will act as chief mourner.*

*Upon his retirement from the chairmanship, Nobeyama devoted himself to the administration of his private library in Odawara. It was decided that the library would close following his death.*

The attention of the entire library world, as well as the Media Improvement Committee's camp, was riveted by that small obituary which ran in every paper.



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“When the Museum of Information History closes, the Kantou Library Force will take custody of its entire document collection,” Genda announced at an all-hands meeting of the Library Task Force.

The entire meeting hall fell silent.

Iku was the only one who wasn’t aware of the situation, and the announcement went completely over her head.

“It’s a private library in Odawara that collects news documents relating to the Media Improvement Committee!” Doujou, sitting behind her, flung out in a displeased tone. The timing of this supplemental explanation was perfect; he knew exactly what Iku did and didn’t know.

“You mean you didn’t know it!?” asked Tedzuka, horrified, from the seat next to hers.

“Why should I know some little backwater private library? It’s not like I’ve been to Odawara that much.”

“A Task Force member who doesn’t know the Museum of Information History is just as absurd as one who doesn’t know the Hino Library! You’re unbelievable!”

“They never mentioned it at my library science night school either!” she retorted.

Tedzuka ignored her and turned around to face Doujou and Komaki. “Please give me a raise. I object to having the same rank and salary as this idiot.”

Komaki came to her defense. “Now now, just think of her as our very own sample of the general population’s level of knowledge. Ignorance has its own kind of value.” It was a demoralizing conclusion. The worst part was the utter *lack* of malice.

But to make up for it, he courteously explained to her, “It’s a library that collects news reports having to do with the Media Improvement Act. It’s a very significant collection for both the supporters and detractors of the Act, but especially the detractors, since they can read documents criticizing the Act which are hard to obtain otherwise.”

“Why is it closing, if it’s so important to everyone?”

“It used to be managed as an incorporated foundation of the Nobeyama Group, but now that its board chairman Nobeyama has passed away, it seems that the Nobeyama Group isn’t motivated to maintain the Museum. I’ve heard the current chairman isn’t very interested in the problems of the Media Improvement Act. Though there were a lot of people who thought it should be maintained, and there were many petitions to that effect.”

Nobeyama himself may have foreseen how the situation would change after his death, for he had left a will that presumed that the Museum of Information History would close. It bequeathed all of the the foundation’s assets to the Kantou Library Force, on the condition that the collection be properly managed and that pertinent documents continued to be collected. Nobeyama had also donated a portion of his personal fortune to the Library





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Force, amounting to quite a windfall on the financial side.

“We’ll be depositing the documents on the Library Base. Since we anticipate interference from the Improvement Special Agency and groups that support them, the entire Library Task Force will be deployed for the handoff. The Museum of Information History closes on the same day as the farewell service, and that’s the day we’ll be transporting the documents.”

The Library Force had wanted to keep the day of the handoff secret, but the Nobeyama Group had already announced their plans in response to questions about the Museum’s closing.

“Troops were dispatched ASAP to the Museum of Information History from within Kanagawa Prefecture to set up a security perimeter. We’ll be linking up with them, and using the UH-60 helicopter to haul the documents, taking two round trips.”

Iku’s eyes grew round at Genda’s announcement. It was the first time since her enlistment that the UH-60JA had been used for anything other than Task Force training.

“Wow, they’re going all out,” she whispered unconsciously.

“Of course they are,” Doujou chided.

“But, so, will two trips be enough to carry everything? I can’t believe that a library’s whole collection, even a small library’s, could be carried away in just two trips in our little all-purpose helicopter.”

“The UH-60JA can carry over 3,500 kilos using an external harness. Also, over half of the Museum of Information History’s documents are compressed onto microfilm, so we can just do a data transfer on those. A seven-ton capacity is plenty for the remaining uncompressed material.”

The Library Force could field a large number of ground transport vehicles, so if they had decided to go by land they could have completed the transfer in one trip. However, since no one would shoot down the helicopter over a residential area, going by air meant it was impossible to interfere with the transfer once the helicopter had taken off. It meant a larger-scale operation than a single trip on the ground, so it was more work, but it was safer from a security standpoint.

On the receiving end, it had been arranged that a large number of personnel from other prefecture would come to lend their aid the defense of the Library Base.

Genda announced the composition of the security teams, one of which would leave immediately to support the security forces already on the ground, and one that would arrive on the day of the handoff. Doujou’s squad was on the team that would leave immediately. Except that—

“In addition, Kasahara will support Commander Inamine’s bodyguard team during his participation in the farewell ceremony that day,” Genda continued.





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Iku froze in shock. By the time she recovered, the meeting had been concluded, and she had lost her chance to ask Genda about her assignment.

“What is this all about?” Iku confronted Doujou angrily as he stood to leave. “Why was I the only one left out?”

The order had to have come from Doujou. On a mission where the entire Library Task Force was being deployed, to leave out only one person only gave the distinct impression that she had been pulled from the front lines deliberately.

“It was the conclusion reached after considering your aptitude.” His voice was just as cold as she had expected.

“I can’t accept this! What’s the point of sending only one Library Task Force member as support? The Defense Force will be fielding plenty already!”

“Escorting VIPs is one of the essential responsibilities of the Library Task Force. That duty was entrusted to the Defense Force this time because it conflicts with the Museum of Information History mission, but we had to send at least some personnel.”

“But why just me?!”

Even as she continued to press, she saw right through him; she knew. Passing off the task of guarding the commander to the Defense Force meant that the document handoff had been judged to be more dangerous and more important. If they had to send personnel to balance the duty roster, it made sense to send the person they needed least in the upcoming fight.

*Which means that’s what I am.*

“The commander will be giving a memorial address at the farewell service, since he was on friendly terms with the late Nobeyama. A female bodyguard looks more refined at these kind of outside events, and you’d be able to protect him even in an emergency. So you’re really quite valuable, you see?”

Komaki’s endorsement was too obviously biased, and instead of making her feel better only made her feel more inferior. *Is that all I’m good for? Looking refined and making a good impression?*

“I don’t think that a person with no experience as a bodyguard would be able to cope appropriately in a situation that calls for a quick reaction. This assignment makes no sense. If you want to be sure to protect him, wouldn’t a veteran be better?”

The more she thought about it, the harder it was to avoid. There was no reason to select Iku as a bodyguard unless it was more important to look elegant than to be absolutely sure of the VIP’s safety. How dangerous was the Nobeyama Group’s farewell ceremony likely to be in the first place? It was clear a bodyguard would be little more than a formality.



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*If it wasn't, they wouldn't have sent around a useless newbie to join the team.*

*Useless.* It hurt to think about describing herself that way.

“You don’t have any experience, but that’s why we’d like you to gain some this time. Our disabled commander doesn’t go to many outside events, so this is a rare chance.”

“Then why isn’t Tedzuka coming with me? He doesn’t have any bodyguard experience either, is it okay for *him* to miss this chance?” Tedzuka looked away when his name came up. “Please don’t lie to me, sir.”

Komaki smiled a bit desperately as she pressed him, and that was when Doujou’s deep voice cut in.

“Enough.”

Iku jumped at his frightening tone, and he shot a brief glare up at her. The intensity in his eyes alone made her flinch back.

“Since I don’t have to lie to you, I won’t. It’s exactly as you think.” She had been wondering what he would say, but knew by the time he finished this introduction. “You have no fighting potential compared to Tedzuka, so I left you out. Got a problem with that?”

*If you think I'm useless, just say "useless"!* Her self-confidence had been pricked and she had pressed hard for an explanation, but it didn’t mean that she had actually wanted to hear that he had judged her useless. She had wanted a reason that would convince her it wasn’t so. A reason that would let her believe that she wasn’t being left out because of her own inadequacy. She had thrown a tantrum because Komaki hadn’t been able to give her that reason, and in the end she had heard the most painful words from the person she least wanted to hear them from.

“You don’t believe in me, Instructor Doujou?”

She knew what Doujou would say, but she was pushing anyway, and she didn’t know why. *Why am I going back for more?*

*He wouldn't give me the answer I want, not even if I threw a tantrum. Why am I giving him a chance to give me the final blow?*

“Have you given me any reason to believe in you?”

*Just as I thought.* And even though she had expected it, it still hurt.

“You’ll be doing all your shifts until the farewell ceremony in the Defense Force bodyguard rotation, so ask the Defense Force chief for your orders,” Doujou recited, and with that, left the meeting hall. Tedzuka hesitated for a moment, then followed him out. Only Komaki remained.

“For what it’s worth,” he offered, “even though it might just sound like I’m trying to convince you, we really do have high hopes for your development as a VIP bodyguard.



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Could you try to think of this mission as practice? Special events like company farewell services don't come along very often. I think you'll gain some very valuable experience."

Komaki watched Iku a moment, waiting for her reaction, but she said nothing. He smiled wryly.

"—Is there anything I can tell him for you?"

At that, Iku finally raised her head.

"...when you said she has no fighting potential, were you being serious, sir?" Tedzuka asked diffidently as they walked down the hall.

Doujou glanced up at him for a moment, but returned his gaze to the corridor ahead.

Tedzuka felt vaguely unsure of himself, but forged on. "It's true that she's ignorant and foolhardy, but I don't think she's useless. I often can't keep up with her in terms of reflexes and instantaneous power, so I don't think it's valid to say that she has no fighting potential compared to me. If she has no fighting potential, then as one of her peers, I should be at about the same level. You can say that she's a woman and so her base athleticism level is lower, but her training results are plenty competitive."

"Hard to believe that those are the words of the one who attacked Kasahara so much in the beginning," Doujou snapped. It was an unjust remark, and he knew it. His face twisted bitterly.

Tedzuka was becoming uncomfortable, but his expression grew daring. "Kasahara and I were selected for entirely different but equally valid reasons. You were the one who told me that, Library Officer Doujou."

His tone was like an unsheathed sword, a direct and blatant attack aimed at Doujou. Doujou faltered beneath Tedzuka's unexpected righteous attack and the guilt it induced, but he couldn't find the words to apologize. While he was still at a loss, Tedzuka mercilessly struck the final blow. "As our superior officer, should you be applying a double standard, sir?"

A just, well-reasoned argument cut deep and hard. "You're right," Doujou murmured.

Tedzuka unbent slightly, extending a gentlemanly, "I was rude, I apologize."

The sound of running footsteps caught up with them, and Komaki joined their group.

"She says, 'I'll show you, you midget! I hate your guts!'"

"Whoa," Tedzuka whistled loudly. "She doesn't restrain herself for anybody...just lets it all out."

"She really knows no fear." Komaki's voice held pure amusement.

Doujou muttered moodily, "She's never shown any restraint."

The words had come out in a very stubborn tone, and Tedzuka looked confused.



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He didn't know how to respond, and finally fell silent. Komaki laughed and interjected, "Right after enlisting, she went so far as to call you a 'midget bastard instructor with a terrible personality,' didn't she? However," Komaki hastened to add, "this time, she's entirely within her rights."

Komaki's tone was level, almost enough to let the barb pass as a slip of the tongue. It made Tedzuka feel awkward, probably even moreso than its intended victim. Perhaps he thought it was time to beat a retreat, for he said, "I should go prepare for our deployment," and quickened his pace so that he left the other two behind. He had read the situation flawlessly.

When Tedzuka was no more than a distant figure ahead of them, Komaki launched an uncharacteristically reproachful attack. "Don't try to escape by pushing her away."

An attack from the king of logical arguments was an especially painful thing.

"You left her out for her own convenience. Don't try to make it Kasahara-san's fault. That isn't why I agreed to support your decision."

Doujou was silent, either because he couldn't find words to reply with, or because he was being forced to confront his guilt head-on. Komaki was always saying, "People who love logical arguments are merciless," and thus in times like these he wouldn't give Doujou the comfort of collusion. Komaki was as hard on his friends as he was on himself.

"Kasahara-san can handle her own problems. She's an adult herself. You have no right to meddle where you're not wanted." He continued reproachfully, "If you can't deal dispassionately with her, then it would be better to let her go. Another squad leader would be able to use her much more effectively."

Komaki was being utterly serious, which only made the attack more cutting.

"Goodness, even I could get past you the way you are right now," Shibasaki declared to Iku, who was standing guard at the front entrance of the library. She had come to fetch Iku for lunch—Shibasaki had adjusted her schedule so that they could eat together, since it wasn't possible to adjust Iku's guard schedule.

As a member of the commando unit of the Defense Force, the very idea that the delicate Shibasaki could get past her was a challenge to Iku's honor. Indignant, she fumed, "That'll be a cold day in hell! No suspicious person will ever make it past me!"

"But you seem really depressed. Doesn't she, Nomura?" Shibasaki asked the Defense Force member Iku was paired with for guard duty. They had enlisted at the same time, so Shibasaki's tone was familiar. In contrast, Nomura's voice was shrill and nervous.

"Oh, um, yes ma'am, I thought she looked a little down."



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*Why is he calling Shibasaki 'ma'am' when they're the same rank?*<sup>17</sup> Iku thought, but didn't stop to investigate. Though her sharp tongue was a drawback, Shibasaki's beauty made her popular among many of the male recruits. Apparently this included Nomura.

The next guard shift came and relieved them, and the two women left the building. It was the day before payday, so today they were eating a free meal in the mess hall, rather than going out.

"I think Nomura wanted to ask you out to lunch."

Nomura had been restless as they waited for the shift change, probably because he was trying to find the right time to invite her to lunch. In the end he hadn't managed it, and he had seemed rather dejected as they parted.

"Too bad. I have no interest in little boys."

"He's the same age as us!"

"No, I don't recognize someone as a man unless he's at least five years older than me. I prefer older men."

"Things could get complicated if *he* heard you say that." Even as she brought him up, she still shied away from saying Doujou's name. It was just as Shibasaki said—she was still depressed.

"Speaking of which, isn't his squad in Odawara by now?"

As a member of Doujou's squad, being asked that question only reaffirmed her feeling of being the only one left behind. "Yeah," she answered, in a tone so depressed that she was disgusted with herself.

"You look like an abandoned puppy," Shibasaki resumed her merciless observations as she picked at her lunch.

"To hell with that, that would make *him* my owner," Iku grumbled.

"He *is* your owner, and you know it," Shibasaki shot back.

Iku didn't know how to reply to that.

"...not my fault, he's my superior officer. Puppies can't choose their owners, and people can't choose their bosses."

"Oh well," Shibasaki deflected Iku's defensive comment, leaving her felt like an idiot for taking the exchange seriously. "I hear they're on pins and needles over in Odawara. They've gone on high alert."

She was as well-informed as always. Iku didn't have the slightest idea where you

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<sup>17</sup> Nomura uses polite forms in addressing Shibasaki, even though as her peer he should be using more casual language. This is really hard to translate into English, but basically he's treating her like a superior rather than an equal.



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could set what kind of net so that it would catch that kind of information. She had been left completely in the dark about conditions in Odawara, as she had been left out of the mission.

“The higher-ups are being cautious because depending on how things go, this could be the worst incident since the Nightmare at Hino.”

“...are you serious?”

Iku’s chopsticks froze in midair.

She had researched the attack on the Hino Library twenty years prior. It was the most tragic incident in library history—it wasn’t much of a stretch to say that the Library Force had been formed just to keep something like that from ever happening again.

“Is it going to be that dangerous?”

Shibasaki raised her eyebrows. “You sure haven’t been paying attention. The Museum of Information History has been untouchable since the Improvement Act was passed. It’s a treasure trove of documents that the Improvement Committee would like hushed up. If it had been a public library, its very existence would have been erased from history long ago. Even as a private library, it probably would have been shut down somehow or other if it had been generally managed, but with the Nobeyama Group backing it it simply couldn’t be brought down. It endured because the former chairman Nobeyama had so much political capital, but now that he’s passed away—well, you get the idea.” Shibasaki broke off, looking disturbed. “It’s the perfect chance to attack.”

Shibasaki hadn’t bothered to say that the library would be on the block for censorship. No, she had bluntly used the word “attack.” It was almost like they were talking about a real war.

“...is it going to be so bad that people die?”

It sounded like such a stupid question. Even she herself thought so.

“That’s why they’re on high alert, right? So that it won’t get that bad. I hear that the Defense Force has upgraded its troopers’ equipment to submachine guns. And as far as I know, the library has never before taken the extreme step of fielding the entire Library Task Force.”

The entire Task Force except for Iku. She had been left out.

*Why am I here and not there right now? A mission as dangerous as one that claimed the lives of twelve people—a mission some people might not come back from—why am I not contributing to it?*

*I wanted to fight too. In order to protect books, alongside other men and women who are fighting for the same reason.*

“Hold on now, don’t look like that!”

Iku didn’t know what she looked like, but she was probably wearing a rather pitiful



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expression.

“Don’t worry, the situation now is different than it was twenty years ago.” Worrying that she had scared Iku, Shibasaki continued, “Today, our side is well-equipped and well-trained. Our troops have more actual combat experience than the police or the armed forces. We won’t be overwhelmed by forces with much better equipment like the Hino Library was.”

“You think so?”

Shibasaki was surprised at how uneasy Iku sounded.

“I wonder if everyone will come back home okay...Commander Genda, Instructor Komaki, Tedzuka...Instructor Doujou, all of them.”

“Don’t even say things like that!” Shibasaki scolded her. She sounded actually angry. “Of course they’ll be fine, now that they’ve ditched an ignorant baby like you!” A few seconds after that rare outburst, Shibasaki mumbled sulkily, “Sorry, I was out of line.”

But Shibasaki was right. She was an ignorant baby, and she knew it. Tedzuka, for instance, hadn’t needed an explanation to know what it meant for the library to “take custody of the Museum of Information History’s entire document collection.” Of course, he probably knew more about such things than the average person, since his father was the president of the Japan Library Association, but that didn’t excuse Iku’s own ignorance.

It made perfect sense that a person who understood an order’s significance immediately was more trustworthy than someone who needed an explanation first.

“...I really didn’t want to have to tell you this, but...” Shibasaki’s mouth twisted. “Commander Genda judged that you had enough fighting potential, and planned to take you along. You may be an idiot, but that has nothing to do with how good you are in a fight. To be perfectly frank, a soldier can be any kind of idiot as long as she has enough brains to understand her commander’s orders.”

Shibasaki kept calling her an idiot, but was trying to say that it was okay to be one—that was kind of supportive, wasn’t it?

“Cutting you out of the plan was utter selfishness on Instructor Doujou’s part. If he lashed out at you, it’s probably because he felt guilty. He probably knows perfectly well that he’s being unfair, after all.”

*What are you saying?* She frowned, puzzled. Shibasaki answered, looking incredulous. But not at Iku. “I mean, even if an idiot daughter who hasn’t told her parents about her combat occupation were to die or be severely injured on a mission, the idiot daughter’s lack of filial piety is her own fault. I don’t know why he would concern himself with maintaining the idiot daughter’s cover, or sparing her parents from heartbreak.”

“...what the hell does he think he’s doing, sticking his nose in my business like that?”





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“I told you, he’s just being selfish. It’s pure favoritism, not a logical decision.”

“I don’t need a favor like that!” *How much do you think you hurt me, when you threw me away like that?* Her indignation at the absent Doujou boiled and seethed.

*But I guess it was my fault in the first place.*

“...it’s because I didn’t settle things with my parents myself.”

If he had given up on her because she hadn’t resolved her own affairs, she had no right to complain about it. Though his interference had been unreasonable, she couldn’t challenge his decision that she *needed* the interference.

“Understand now?” Shibasaki asked smugly, then laughed.

Iku laughed too after a moment, and breathed a sigh of relief. “You know, I’m kind of glad.” At Shibasaki’s questioning look, Iku continued, a little self-consciously. “It wasn’t because I was useless that I got left behind. I probably sound like a baby for saying it.”

“...that’s one area I lose against you in,” Shibasaki shrugged. “Admitting that I’m being a baby.”

“I’m going to work hard and do what I was assigned to do.” Iku’s murmur was like a declaration. True childish selfishness was throwing a tantrum and saying, *I don’t want this assignment, I want that one instead.* People would couldn’t handle what they were assigned to do had no right to demand trust from others.

She would wait until after she had carried out her assignment to tell Doujou to mind his own business.

★

“Kasahara-san isn’t coming?”

Orikuchi, in the name of investigative journalism, had entered the Museum of Information History the day before it closed. This question came after she had taken a tour of the entire building, in the hall that now functioned as security headquarters.

“She’s escorting the commander to the memorial service, at the insistence of her immediate superior,” Genda said teasingly. Doujou shot him a dirty look.

“Oh, really?” Orikuchi looked surprised. “That’s unexpectedly tender of him, he doesn’t really seem the type...well, maybe he does,” she laughed, changing her mind halfway through. “Sorry, sorry, you’re very tender. Being her guard dog and all.” She was talking about how Doujou had protested when she had published Iku’s picture the last time.

“She was assigned based on her aptitude. An outsider has no right to criticize that decision.”

“I wasn’t criticizing it,” Orikuchi pouted. To Genda, she complained, “Do something about this pigheaded boy.”



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“Don’t tease him so much, Orikuchi. You wouldn’t believe how long he can sulk.”

“Thanks for the support, sir,” Doujou said peevishly. With Orikuchi there, it was like having two Gendas around. He was having a hard time handling them, especially their habit of saying rude and insensitive things.

“Well, she is a rare treasure—the only female Task Force member in the country. There’s some concern about how well she’ll grow, and we don’t want to lose her by throwing her into a rough situation before she has enough experience.”

Finally Genda was giving him some honest backup. The way he hadn’t just given it in the beginning was one of Genda’s more obnoxious traits.

“I bet Kasahara-san was upset,” Orikuchi said pointedly to Doujou, preventing his escape from the conversation. Her guess was impressively accurate.

“She told me off. ‘I’ll show you, you midget,’ were her exact words, I believe.”

Orikuchi and Genda burst out laughing. “Doujou-kun *is* a little on the short side...” Orikuchi remarked insensitively. “But try to understand. I think if she hadn’t snapped at you, she might have burst into tears.”

Doujou flinched inwardly as Orikuchi thrust in his face something he had tried to ignore. He had experienced Iku’s contradictory nature several times by now—though she was fierce and antagonistic, she was also fragile and quick to cry. He wished he could get used to it, but every time it happened he grew very uncomfortable. This time it was made even worse by his guilty feelings.

“‘I’ll show you,’ eh? Sounds like she admires you quite a bit.”

“No.” Doujou promptly contradicted her. “She admires someone else. Not me.”

His irritation was so obvious that Genda, who had been about to interrupt, thought better of it and just smiled wryly.

★

It was the day of the memorial service—as well as the day the Museum of Information History would close.

“Ugh, I’m getting full just watching you!” Shibasaki said, wrinkling her nose. Shibasaki had low blood pressure, so she never ate much during breakfast.

“You just don’t eat enough. Oh, hey, if you don’t want your *tamagoyaki*, give it here.”

“Take it all! I’ve lost my appetite watching you eat.” Shibasaki carelessly slide the plate of *tamagoyaki* toward Iku. “Leaving that aside—you’re eating twice as much as usual!”

“I’ve gotta load up today. As they say, ‘you can’t fight on an empty stomach.’”

“Since when are you going to be fighting?”

“In my heart, I’ll be just as fired up as if I *were* fighting!”



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Today the Task Force would be fighting the battle of the Museum of Information History. Though she had been left behind, she wanted to look upon her own mission with the same attitude.

As one with little experience, Iku would be fulfilling a role closer to that of caretaker than bodyguard. Thus her mission was to make Inamine feel as mobile as possible.

“Well, you’ve certainly been working hard.” Shibasaki’s casual praise took Iku by surprise and gave her mixed feelings. —*awkward*.

There hadn’t been many days before the memorial service, but she had received instruction from a Defense Force member who had escorted Inamine to public events before, and last night she had borrowed Inamine’s spare wheelchair and gotten Shibasaki to help her practice her escort duties.

“Hey, thanks for helping me practice and stuff.”

“That’s right, since I was so kind as to help you, I won’t allow any blunders now!” Shibasaki was using hyperbole expertly to cover her embarrassment.

Iku nodded sincerely. “Got it.”

They left for the memorial service at the scheduled time of ten o’clock in the morning.

They met Inamine in front of headquarters. Before he was lifted into the official vehicle, he faced them all and bowed. The troops had a perfect view of his bowed head, as he was sitting and they were standing. “Thank you all for your help today.”

After they had completed the pleasantries, the next step was to load Inamine into the car. A particularly muscular male trooper physically lifted him into the seat, while Iku swiftly folded his wheelchair—the fruit of her intensive training—and stowed it in the trunk.

Iku got in next to Inamine, who smiled sweetly at her. “I’ll be depending on your help today.”

Charmed for an instant by that gentle smile, Iku nodded smartly. “Yes, sir!!”

*Right, this is the kind of man I’m working under,* she remembered proudly. The car glided forward with scrupulous care, and Iku gazed off toward the direction of Odawara.

The battle had probably started by now. Iku silently prayed for the fortunes of her friends and colleagues.

★

The Improvement Special Agency unit had encircled the Museum of Information History by 0900—the museum’s normal opening time, and also the appointed time for



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the document transfer between the Nobeyama Group and the Kantou Library Force. The Library Force had been able to guess the time when the battle would start from the steps the Improvement Special Agency had taken beforehand to control the flow of traffic in the area.

As for the Library Force, their UH-60JA helicopter would take off from the Library Base at 1000 and land at the Museum of Information History at 1030. Since they had been required to submit their flight plan to the Air Traffic Management Bureau, the Improvement Special Agency probably also knew their plans.

The first hurdle in this war would be holding out until the first arrival of the helicopter.

*In accordance with the notice presented in Improvement Order number 7726, which will be delivered to the Kantou Library Base, as representatives of the Media Improvement Committee and its chairman Onodera Shigeru, we will be performing an inspection as prescribed in the Improvement Act, Article Three! Lay down your arms and surrender immediately!*

The voice of the commander of the Improvement Agency unit boomed out of a speaker, announcing their mission. The inspection notice was going to the Library Base, in spite of the fact that the inspection was to take place at the Museum of Information History. As always, they were trying to take the Library by surprise in whatever small way they could. Genda, standing by in the front entryway, laughed fearlessly and took up the microphone connected to their broadcasting equipment.

*'The Kantou Library Force hereby invokes the right of book defense guaranteed by Section Four of the Library Laws, the Law of Library Freedom, Article 34! —If you wanna inspect us, you're going to have to get past us first!'*

And with that unnecessarily provocative reply, the battle for the Museum of Information History was begun.

★

*...the sun is shining brightly on the day of the memorial service for Nobeyama Souhachi (former chairman of the Nobeyama Group)—and the Museum of Information History, which Nobeyama managed for half a lifetime, is approaching its own demise. It looks like it will go out with a violent bang.*

*The Improvement Special Agency has marked for censorship the documents left by Nobeyama to the Kantou Library Force. The announcement was made without delivering an inspection notice to the Museum of Information History, where the inspection will actually take place. This attempt to outwit the Library Force while*



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*they're busy with patrols is a specialty of the Improvement Special Agency.*

*For whose sake is a man's dying wish ignored and this forcible inspection taking  
place?*

*Orikuchi Maki*

★

“Looks like they really brought in a huge team, too.” From his prone position on the rooftop behind a short fence, Tedzuka murmured in surprise. Thanks to laws which stated that the battle could not extend beyond the facility under inspection, the Library Force was always automatically guaranteed the highest point—namely, the facility’s roof.

Looking out over the grounds, they could see that the Improvement Special Agency’s unit had spread out to completely surround the Museum. The Improvement Special Agency had fielded about two hundred people, if one counted the logistical support team enforcing the traffic restrictions in the surrounding area. Almost an entire branch had been mobilized. Perhaps that was why the Library Base wasn’t being targeted—they were throwing all their strength at the weaker target.

Previous censorship raids on the Kantou Library Force had involved at most fifty to sixty people on each side, so it was the first time either side had fought a battle of this magnitude. The vehicles visible from the roof were also not the vans used in normal raids, but were combat-rated trucks, and there was no doubt that the weapons packed within were as plentiful as they were heavy.

But then, the same went for the Library Force. Considering the vastness of the museum’s grounds, it would be the largest clash possible within an urban area.

“In terms of number of personnel, we’re evenly matched.” Replying to Tedzuka was a member of a different squad, who like Tedzuka was stationed as a sniper. Shindou by name, he was the Library Task Force’s most expert marksman, and a veteran who had been with the Task Force since its establishment.

“Try not to kill anyone if you can help it. The fighting gets more intense when people die.”

“Will the other side show the same consideration for us?”

“Probably not, but at least we’re both restricted to lightly-loaded weapons. Anyway, you don’t have to bother thinking about the other side’s attitudes. We’ve been privileged to be stationed on the high ground; if we kill anyone and enrage the enemy, it’s our comrades on the ground who will pay for it. That’s the one and only thing we need to remember.” It was a perspective one only gained from long years as a sniper.



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“And the other side can go ahead and worry about the risk of enraging *us*. If that happens, we’ll use our position to its full advantage. If they understand that, they won’t do anything crazy,” Shindou concluded.

In a censorship raid, a sniper’s existence served to *prevent* the battle from escalating. To that end, five snipers were stationed on the roof. They were basically devoted to responding to requests from squads on the ground, providing cover fire for them. Some veterans also simply provided fire as they judged necessary, but at Tedzuka’s level it was all he could do to follow his commander’s orders to intervene.

“We’re not looking for accuracy—in fact, try to miss. Gunfire coming from above will put enough pressure on them.”

“Understood, sir.”

Since Tedzuka had demonstrated aptitude with the rifle, he had undergone periodic marksmanship training, but he didn’t think that, as a rookie in his first year of enlistment, he could compete with a ten-year veteran in terms of accuracy.

A transmission on the snipers’ frequency came through on his earpiece.

*‘Main entrance to sniper squad, we need backup!’*

“Tedsuka, someone else, come with me! The other two, watch the back entrance!” Shindou shouted. Staying at a crouch so that he couldn’t be seen from below, he took up a position from which he could target the main entrance, and Tedzuka imitated him. In front of the entrance, a fierce firefight was starting, using the barricades and trenches that had been constructed there.

The Library Force may have had the advantage of the high ground, but the Improvement unit had an even bigger advantage: the ability to shoot freely. When the target of censorship was public property or personal assets, often the responsibility for compensation for damage caused by gunfire going “inside-to-outside” fell upon the Library Force, even though they were shooting in self-defense. Actually, the reparations were handled by special damage insurance, but there was a direct connection between the extent of the damage and the rising costs of their insurance premiums. In recent years, their premiums had gone up steadily, putting immense pressure on the Library Force’s budget.

The Improvement unit didn’t have to worry about aggravating the “outside-to-inside” damage. As a national government organization, they had a budget incomparably larger than the Library Force’s. They had no need to hesitate over shooting. This lack of budgetary concern was a point of envy for the Library Force.

Adjusting his scope to compensate for the direction and speed of the wind, Tedzuka took aim at the Improvement unit troops. To let them know that they were being attacked from above, he targeted a bronze ornament on top of the gatepost. He held his breath



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and squeezed the trigger, and the ornament exploded into fragments right on cue. Then Shindou and the other sniper pumped warning shots one after the other into gaps in the enemy's formation. The unit turned to retreat as if the hounds of hell were snapping at their heels. Return fire aimed at the roof passed far above the snipers' heads.

In the end, the enemy would probably push their way onto the premises and it would become a siege on the building itself, but if they couldn't hold them back at least until the helicopter made its first trip, it would be impossible to hold out until the second.

*Bullets fall like rain upon the Museum of Information History. There is no respect for the Museum's thirty-year history or the vision of its late board chairman. They sow lead shot as if they could gun down that history and vision.*

*Contrast with the Library Force's counterattack. Their strikes are always counterattacks, always defensive. They resign themselves to letting the first blow of every battle fall upon them. Deeply familiar with the advantages of having the initiative, they still choose to relinquish those advantages.*

*"Not everyone sees defense of books as a good reason for a preemptive strike," explains Inamine Kazuichi, current commander of the Kantou Library Base and founder of the Library Force. So they accept their disadvantaged position and persist in nonaggressive defense.*

*Orikuchi Maki*

Thirteen people. With fifteen minutes before the helicopter was due to arrive, that was the total number of injured.

"How many of those are seriously wounded?" Genda shouted to Ogata, his assistant commander, who had compiled the information.

Ogata answered, "All thirteen. I didn't count those who were fine after receiving first aid from the medical squad."

"Makes sense," Genda agreed, then gave his orders. "Prioritize the more seriously wounded and have them stand by on the roof. We'll use the cabin of the helicopter to transport them out."

Ogata replied that due to modifications to the helicopter, it could only carry ten people.

"Then put the rest on the second flight. If it looks like they won't make it, request helicopter backup from the Chuubu Library Force."





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“We can provide a helicopter.”

This interruption came from Orikuchi, who until that moment had been absorbed in gathering information and had barely said a word.

“I’ll make arrangements for them to send a news helicopter. It’ll be faster to have one come from within the city than from somewhere else in the area, right?”

“All right, thanks,” Genda decided quickly. Orikuchi used her cell phone to get in touch with headquarters, while Genda continued to snap out orders to the Force at a dizzying pace. The situation could change from one minute to the next, and the only ones who could see the whole picture were those in security headquarters.

As Orikuchi hung up, Genda made an apologetic gesture. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. We fight by writing about you fighting. We’ll do whatever it takes to back you up so that you can devote yourselves whole-heartedly to the battle.” Orikuchi’s smile was so enchantingly glamorous it seemed out of place in the current situation.

Not only was Sesousha a member of the Nobeyama conglomerate, it also had a profound connection to the Museum of Information History, established by the conglomerate’s former chairman Nobeyama Souhachi. Many reporters had a special place in their hearts for the Museum, but among them the employees of Sesousha had an especially deep attachment.

Genda suddenly remembered something she had once said, something they both would be too embarrassed to say or hear now. *Go down your own path. I’ll be following right behind you.*

*There is no way to transport the Library Force’s wounded except by air. The Improvement Special Agency has completely surrounded the Museum of Information History and won’t even allow the wounded to be carried out. Even if the Library Force called an ambulance, the Improvement Special Agency’s traffic restrictions would prevent it from arriving.*

*In a censorship raid, even when there are deaths on either side, no one is charged with any crime—just as a soldier isn’t charged for killing an enemy soldier on the battlefield. But at least the Improvement Special Agency, as the party attacking from without, can freely remove their wounded from the front lines.*

*The situation is nothing but advantageous for the Improvement Special Agency.*

*Orikuchi Maki*



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It was 1025 hours.

The UH-60JA helicopter landed at the Museum of Information History five minutes earlier than expected.

“Fire! Fire with all you’ve got!!” Shindou ordered the sniper squad with uncharacteristic vehemence. Even on the ground, orders to shoot were flying fast and thick. This was the only time when the Library Force would forget about minimizing property damage and rain heavy fire down on the Improvement unit.

“Dammit!” Tedzuka took aim at the embankment in front of a trench occupied by the Improvement unit and pulled the trigger. Thanks to the downwash from the helicopter, there were no guarantees on the bullets’ accuracy, no matter how carefully he aimed. He had no choice but to aim at inorganic targets.

*Please keep your heads down, I’m begging you,* he half-prayed as he “fired with all he’d got.” With so much warning fire, if anyone got shot it was their own fault. *Don’t blame me if you die.*

The two containers to be transported had been sitting ready on the roof since the previous day—all that was needed was to attach the metal fixtures for the harness they would be suspended from. The wounded were loaded into the cabin, and the UH-60JA took off again without ever even stopping its rotors.

Thanks to the intense warning fire, the Improvement unit didn’t get many shots off at the UH-60JA helicopter before it took off. But after that, the fighting intensified—as if in revenge for the safe passage of the helicopter.

*At last the helicopter arrived for its first load. The Library Force launched an all-out offensive for the first time today. The redoubtable Improvement Special Agency stood helpless, under fire so heavy that they couldn’t even peek out from behind their barricades.*

*The jewel of the Kantou Library Force, their all-purpose helicopter, took off loaded with the Force’s wounded and hauling a three-ton container. Packed inside the container was over thirty years’ worth of media related to the Improvement Act. The Library Force is protecting history that must not be silenced.*

*I’ll note here that, though it was only a small gesture of aid to the Library Force, the Improvement Special Agency fired on the helicopter our company sent to retrieve some of the wounded.*

*Orikuchi Maki*



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“All hands, pull back! Get inside the building!”

Thirty minutes after the helicopter had flown away with its first load, they finally couldn’t hold the line any longer.

Doujou and Komaki, who were stationed at the back entrance, were following their commander’s orders to provide cover fire for the troops who had been stationed outside the building as they retreated inside. As a force composed of many small squads, when the Library Task Force gathered together for an all-out battle, a commander was assigned to each position, chosen from among the squad leaders based on seniority and leadership skills, and other squad leaders would fall under his command. It was only natural that Doujou would fall into this category, as one who had only this year gotten subordinates of his own. It was also not unusual for squads to be divided and their members assigned to different posts depending on aptitude—just as Tedzuka had been sent around to the sniper squad.

A polite word for the Library Force’s usage of its personnel was “flexible”—a less polite word was “disorganized.”

The Improvement unit’s attack was merciless, even during their opponent’s retreat. Shooting their soldiers was a reliable way to reduce the other side’s strength, after all. In contrast, the Library Force’s central principle was completely nonaggressive defense, so ideally they never interfered with their opponent’s retreat. Though higher-ups often heard complaints from people in the field that such a restriction was completely absurd in a real battle.

“*We must not let our right of book defense escalate the conflict even more,*” Inamine admonished them often. Doujou understood that, but at times like this he did chafe bitterly at the restriction.

One trooper left the barricade and ran toward them. *Too slow*, Doujou thought, mentally comparing him to someone else. The moment she crossed his mind, though, the trooper was—*predictably*, came the callous thought—caught in enemy gunfire before he could reach the building.

They couldn’t immediately tell where he had been shot, but since he couldn’t stand up from where he had fallen, it was probably in the leg. The Improvement unit didn’t continue to shoot at the already injured man, but bullets flew thick, fast, and merciless over his head.

“Komaki, cover me.” He put down his rifle and put his helmet back on.

“Can you make it?” Komaki asked briefly.

“A midget like me is a smaller target.”

As if remembering the one who always used that epithet, Komaki gave a small laugh. Then he yelled into his radio. “Officer Doujou retrieving wounded! Prepare to provide cover fire!”



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In lieu of an order, Komaki began shooting, and the density of gunshots coming from the Library Force's side increased by a few levels. As if that very sound were pushing at his back, Doujou flew out the entrance.

He didn't know if the gunshots assaulting his eardrums were coming from his comrades or his enemies. It didn't matter which—if he let his feet slow from fear, he would be hit.

Doujou skidded over to where the trooper lay curled up. Without wasting time asking after the trooper's health, Doujou shoved an elbow under his body and raised him slightly, then pulled him over his shoulder with one quick jerk.

The added weight slowed his feet considerably. He had no choice but to trust his comrades to provide enough cover fire. He tried to stay bent down as low as possible, but bending low while carrying an adult man over his shoulder made his legs buckle. Not to mention that the trooper was much more muscular than Doujou.

His knees gave out at the last moment, and he literally tumbled into the building. He pushed the trooper off his back—not having enough energy left to put him down properly—and collapsed, gasping for breath.

“Doujou!!” Komaki yelled—it was only in times like these that one could hear him raise his voice. Doujou waved one hand to show that he was alright. He didn't have his voice back yet.

“...’s he?” he finally asked, only managing to voice the last half of the question.

Komaki answered, “He'll be fine. He doesn't have any new wounds. We took him to get first aid.”

Good, he had done his duty. Doujou laid his head down once more.

*I wouldn't have needed to go to all that trouble if that had been her out there, he thought selfishly—though he had been the one to decide to leave her behind in the first place.*

*Finally, the Library Force has been pushed back into the building. The Improvement unit's gunfire mercilessly pursues the retreating Library Force troops. In contrast, the Library Force doesn't interfere when the Improvement unit retreats.*

*“Our mission is to protect books, not to disable the Improvement Special Agency,” says the current supreme commander of the Library Force.*

*Is the Improvement Special Agency's mission really censorship, or is it to attack the Library Force? The indiscriminate means by which they carry out their censorship makes one wonder about its legality.*

*Orikuchi Maki*



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Security headquarters was moved to the highest floor of the four-story Museum of Information History. It had only been a matter of time until the Library Force was pushed back into the building. Now they would pull back floor by floor, buying time. The retreat inside had cut the rooftop sniper squad's effectiveness in half.

They had lost the first floor when the helicopter arrived for the second load. It took on both the wounded and the second container, just as it had the first time. The Improvement Special Agency's attack grew so intense that in the twenty minutes before the helicopter took off again, the Library Force had lost the second floor as well.

"All right, now's as good a time as any!" Genda shouted, after he had received a report of the helicopter's takeoff. "Mission accomplished! Let's blow this popsicle stand!"

*The helicopter has taken off with its second load. But it won't be able to carry away all the remaining documents. The Improvement unit has already pushed its way into the building itself—the Library Force has had to abandon two of the four floors.*

*It would take another hour for the helicopter to return for a third load. In the end, the Library Force was forced to make a bitter, heart-wrenching decision.*

*Orikuchi Maki*

*'Kantou Library Force to Improvement Special Agency! We hereby inform you that at 1240 hours the Kantou Library Force will relinquish our rights to all documents remaining in this building! Repeat! At 1240 hours the Kantou Library Force will relinquish our rights to all documents remaining in this building! Reply by calling line 03!'*

After Genda's announcement on the building's PA system, the sounds of gunfire that had filled the building gradually died down.

Finally, the phone rang in the conference room that was serving as their headquarters. The intermittent calls had all been from interior lines. Genda put the phone on speaker mode.

*'Improvement Special Agency to the Kantou Library Force. We'll give you an extra 30 minutes. You must evacuate the building by 1310 hours. No one will be allowed to reenter the building once they have left it. Moreover, we will be inspecting all bags and containers being carried out of the building. That is all.'* Their warning delivered, the other side hung up. Genda ordered the assistant commander to announce the terms to the Force over the PA system.

Orikuchi's brow wrinkled. "There were other documents? That you're leaving behind?"

"There were other documents specifically intended to be left behind," Genda answered



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as he began to pack up the equipment in the room. Orikuchi pitched in to help. “When we filed our flight plan, we said we’d be making three trips—we also have a third container of documents sitting on the roof. It contains books and magazines that the Library Force already has enough extra copies of in its collection. The other side can’t go home empty-handed, not after they fielded such a large force. So we prepared a way for them to save face.”

“What?!” Orikuchi whispered. “Why couldn’t you have compromised and divided the documents between yourselves like that in the first place?”

“The enemy’s objective was to capture all the documents—they’d never agree to a deal like that. It’s only because we’ve resisted them so hard up to this point that the Special Agency can believe that the documents we’re leaving behind are the results of their assault. Also, the Library Force never wants to give the impression that we’re setting a precedent of bowing to censorship without fighting it.” Genda added pointedly, “Don’t put any of this in your article.”

Orikuchi shrugged and tilted her head to the side, a gesture of acknowledgment left over from her school days. Her article would probably end up saying something like, “*though it was a close battle, the Library Force couldn’t save all the documents and a portion of them were seized.*”

“Being a champion of justice seems to involve a lot of managing the impressions you give. You have it so hard!” she teased.

“Have a little sympathy!” he laughed. He knew she was joking, and he didn’t bother turning serious and contradicting her—he wasn’t Doujou, after all.

One of his subordinates watched with wide eyes as Genda threw the radios he was holding into their case in an attempt to clean up. After that, he kept Genda far away from the cleanup efforts.

By the time the Library Task Force had withdrawn from the Museum of Information History, detached from the Library Force unit from Kanagawa that had been working with them, and returned to the Library Base, it was after three o’clock. At the base, the task of organizing the documents they had received had already begun, so the Library Task Force divested themselves of their equipment and returned to their offices.

“Now all that’s left is for Kasahara to come back, and then everyone will be home safe,” Genda said, looking at the clock. The memorial service was probably over by now.

He was just thinking that he’d have to give his after-action report to Inamine soon, when his phone extension rang.

Genda answered, and then his expression turned grim as he listened to the other end.



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Immediately the atmosphere in the room grew tense. There were no strangers to crisis situations here.

In fact, if one had to name someone who *was*...

Genda hung up the phone and turned to address them all. “Commander Inamine was abducted by suspicious persons outside the memorial service hall. —Along with Kasahara.”

There was a jarring clatter in Doujou’s ears. Everyone turned to look at him, and after a moment, he realized he had knocked over his own chair.

“...ah,” he opened his mouth to say something, but couldn’t decide what, so he finally closed it. He himself didn’t know what he had planned to blurt out. Next to him, Komaki stood, righted his fallen chair, and pressed down hard on Doujou’s shoulder. His knees bent at the pressure and he was forced back down into his seat.

—His head cleared.

Doujou focused his eyes on Genda and said, “I apologize. Please continue.”

Genda accepted the apology silently, and began to explain the situation.



Iku didn’t give a damn just who their attackers were affiliated with.

They had given their name as the “Harvest Time Association<sup>18</sup>,” a political organization, but that was probably just a throwaway name—something innocuous-sounding to replace their real name and make them seem just like the other groups, not likely to cause trouble. It was indeed doubtful whether they had properly registered as a group at all.

Inamine’s guard numbered four, counting Iku. Their attackers numbered six. They had marked Inamine as he gave his memorial address and tailed him as far as the funeral hall’s parking lot. But in a ceremony attended by celebrities and persons of renown, their attackers had exuded a barbarous air, one noticeable enough to put Inamine’s defenders on their guard.

Truly, no one had thought that something would happen *here*, but the veteran bodyguards reacted beautifully. Iku was ordered to take Inamine in his wheelchair and hide in the shadow of the car. She may have been a member of the Library Force’s commando unit, but since she was a complete rookie, it was a reasonable order.

Just as she reached the vehicle, the enemy pulled out (probably illegally obtained)

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<sup>18</sup> The organization’s name is *Bakushuukai*, literally “Barley Harvest Time Association.” To English speakers, this sounds like an association for farmers or something, but according to a Japanese friend, it implies that the group is good at “harvesting” or gathering things (like money, members, or power). It should also be noted that *baku* can also mean “explosion” when written with a different character.





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guns and pointed them at the Library troops—a predictable tactic. The Defense Force members hadn't obtained permission to carry guns off Library grounds, so all they had were collapsible batons.

But that was plenty.

Two of the enemy had guns, but they held them like beginners, making uneconomical movements. The Library troops knocked the guns out of their hands before they had a chance to use them. There weren't many people in the disabled parking lot, but those faraway bystanders didn't even notice the scuffle, it happened so quickly.

Iku meanwhile had gotten Inamine to the shelter of the car's shadow, keeping him out of the way of the fight entirely.

Just as the Library Force was preparing the finishing blow, the man who appeared to lead the other side shouted, "We'll blow up the funeral hall! Our comrades are watching! If you don't obey us, they'll set off the bombs we've placed throughout the hall!" His babble stopped the Library troopers in their tracks. It would take time for the funeral attendants to vacate the huge hall—it was probably still quite crowded.

The Library side had no way of determining whether he was lying or not.

"We demand that you hand over Inamine Kazuichi."

"Fine." This quick reply came from Inamine himself. Indeed, no one but Inamine could have answered them. Even Iku, huddled over his wheelchair, could do nothing to prevent the situation.

One of the men—there was no point in distinguishing between them—walked up to Inamine and Iku. He roughly grabbed the handles of the manual wheelchair, and Iku found herself slapping his hands away before she could stop herself.

"Bitch!" he snapped out. Iku ignored him and addressed the leader.

"I'll be accompanying you." At his dubious look, Iku continued. "I'm the staff member assigned as Commander Inamine's caretaker. Since Commander Inamine doesn't have the use of his legs, he needs me. I cannot think that *you* can provide adequate care to the Commander." Iku had doubts about her own ability to provide adequate care for him, but she pressed on regardless.

"*Have you given me any reason to believe in you?*" Doujou's curt rejection surfaced in her memory. Even if it had just been an excuse to exclude her from the mission, she knew that it hurt because it was partly true. *I haven't done anything that gives me the right to demand his trust.* Thus Iku couldn't let Inamine walk into danger alone and empty-handed. It was better to go with him, even if they were both empty-handed.

"You need to have some consideration for your hostage's safety."

There was no reason for the group opposing the Library to kidnap Inamine except as a



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bargaining chip. The leader looked like he was thinking over Iku's words.

Iku hadn't participated in the fight, and they had seen her helping Inamine at the memorial service. There was no reason to doubt her role as Inamine's caretaker. The fact that she was female probably entered his calculation too.

"Fine, sure. You come too."

Iku was surrounded by the men as she pushed Inamine in his wheelchair. The wheelchair, which usually needed no more than gentle guiding, wouldn't even move until she started pushing. Inamine had disabled manual mode; it must be his silent way of telling her that he didn't object to her coming along. If they didn't create ways for Iku to help Inamine, her cover as his attendant wouldn't hold.

Her chest swelled with the trust he had placed in her.

"If you tail us, we'll blow the funeral hall! And we won't guarantee the lives of these two either! Got it?" the leader blustered to the Library Force members as they left. It was an order that went without saying—it would be impossible for the Library Force to tail the group, as they already knew the model, color, and license plate number of their car. It wasn't as if the Force members were trained in surveillance work either.

"Librarian!" The bodyguard squad leader called her only by her rank—out of prudence, she knew. "Take care of the commander." His voice was suffused with bitter helplessness. Iku gave him a small nod.

The Harvest Time Association had parked their vehicle, a slightly dirty wagon, in the non-disabled parking lot. When the tailgate was lifted up, Iku frowned. The seats had been taken out, but there were tools and other miscellaneous junk thrown around inside the cabin. Just where were they planning on putting the wheelchair? She was outraged at the mess.

One of the men entered the cabin and kicked half-heartedly at the clutter, clearing a space, though it was barely wide enough. Two more men grabbed the wheelchair from either side and began to lift it.

Iku shouted at them, "Don't tip it forward!" Inamine was clutching the armrests as the wheelchair was lifted from the back. Iku stepped in front of him and held onto him as he slid forward. For a moment, all of Inamine's weight was on her. His body was surprisingly light, and his weight was uneven between his left and right sides. He had lost one of his legs, after all.

"Put him down for now! Turn sideways, and tilt the wheelchair backwards as you lift it! Do a count or something so you both lift at the same time!"

"You sure do nag a lot, bitch!" one of the men spat out testily. But she was much more frightened by the fact that her orders were necessary. To not understand that if you tilted



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a wheelchair forward, the person on it would fall off—how little imagination did they have?

Somehow the wheelchair was finally loaded into the cabin, but there was no carpet or blanket spread on the floor. Every jolt and vibration of the vehicle would be transmitted to the wheelchair. Inamine's normal wheelchair was custom-made and had a built-in suspension and cushioning, but for the outing today he was using a compact store-bought model, which had poor shock absorption. Iku rummaged through the clutter on the floor, trying to find something that could serve as cushioning, but—

“Quit moving around!”

A man in the back seat pointed his gun at her. She halted reluctantly. “Don't you have any kind of cushioning!?” she lashed out.

“Just bear with it!” he dismissed her. Iku felt a near-murderous rage. To these men, Inamine, as the Library Base Commander, was only a symbol. They were completely ignoring his needs as a disabled person.

“I'm sorry, Commander, I don't know how long we'll be in here, but...” Iku sat at Inamine's feet with her legs stretched out to the side and grabbed the wheels of the wheelchair with both hands. The wheelchair's brake was on, but she didn't know how much it would jump and slide on the jumbled floor when the vehicle was moving. Not to mention that she wasn't optimistic enough to hope that the men would drive carefully.

“Thank you. I'm sorry to impose on you.”

“Not at all. In return, when we get back, please tell Instructor Doujou that Kasahara did her duty,” she said, smiling.

Inamine smiled back and nodded. “I promise.”

The ride was bumpy from the start, and Iku devoted all her strength to holding down the jouncing wheelchair.

“Even if it's a nuisance to transport, I should have come in my usual chair,” Inamine grumbled quietly.

After nearly an hour, they arrived at their destination, a tidy but vacant-looking five-story building. They were surrounded by cleared, empty land already partitioned. It appeared to be a residential park not yet on the market; it was dotted here and there with prebuilt homes and apartment buildings, but there was almost no pedestrian traffic. From the street signs she could tell they had entered Tachikawa, but naturally she didn't know their exact address.

Iku nagged and ordered the men again as they unloaded Inamine, then pushed his wheelchair into the building at gunpoint. She gave some thought to exploiting the men's



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heedlessness and snatching one of their guns, but even if she did, she wouldn't last long when the odds were six-against-one, with more guns on their side. And after all, Inamine was her first priority.

*Anyway, these guys will have to contact the Library Force and have some kind of negotiation, and after negotiations open, the Library Force will definitely act somehow.* Until then, Iku's role was to accompany and take care of Inamine, without making the situation any worse.

★

It was after five o'clock in the afternoon when the call came in from the Harvest Time Association, the organization that had abducted Inamine.

The Library Force had already contacted the police, and they had redirected their phone line to a large lecture hall, prepared to trace any call that came through. Along with police personnel, there were ten-odd members from the Library Task Force, including Genda, the squad leaders, and their aides. The chief of the Defense Force was also present, as well as the Defense Force members who had witnessed the abduction.

As the representative of the Library Force, Genda took the call.

*'This is the Harvest Time Association. We have Commander Inamine in custody.'*

"This is Library Supervisor Genda Ryuusuke, representing the Library Force. I would like to verify the safety of Commander Inamine and his female caretaker. Would you put the two of them on the phone?"

*'Not Inamine. We'll allow you to talk to the girl,'* came the quick, practiced reply. It sounded like they had already planned for this compromise.

Doujou leaned a little closer to the phone, as if he couldn't help himself. Since Iku was caught up in the situation, all of Doujou's squad was allowed to be present.

*'Hello?'*

Her voice was strong. Doujou took a deep breath.

Genda asked, "Are you alright?"

*'Yes, we're fine. Oh, could you please tell Shibasaki to cancel our reservation at Transall? We were going to go there tonight...what the hell!? I can ask them that much, can't I!? It's a super-expensive place! It's a big deal if you don't cancel ahead of time—or are you planning on paying the cancellation fee for me!?'* The police smirked at the unexpectedly comical quarrel, but the Task Force member's faces were uniformly grim. *'Ah—'* Iku said, and then the line went dead. Since the Harvest Time Association hadn't communicated their demands yet, they had probably hung up temporarily so that the call couldn't be traced.

After a little while, the phone rang again, and Genda answered. It was the same kidnapper. Without giving Genda a chance to even say his name, he rattled out their



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demands. It seemed Iku's improvisation during the conversation had angered him.

*'We despair of the library, which defies the Media Improvement Act and disdains order, morality, and human rights! In exchange of the lives of the hostages, we demand the destruction of the documents from the Museum of Information History!'*

He continued, informing them of the conditions of the deal:

*'1. The Library Force must disclose to the Harvest Time Association all the documents that were taken from the Museum of Information History this day.*

*'2. Under the supervision of the Harvest Time Association, the Library Force will match the documents against the donation inventory officially published by the Nobeyama Group a few days ago, as well as the list of confiscatable documents published today by the Media Improvement Committee, and then destroy all the documents by incineration.*

*'We will grant you two hours to make preparations for the disclosure. We'll be in touch again after those two hours,'* he finished, and then hung up.

"She seemed well, didn't she?" Komaki murmured to Doujou, who showed his agreement with a silent nod. "Bold as hell," Tedzuka whispered in shock, more astonished than horrified.

The results of the phone trace were ready soon enough. The two calls had each been made from a different cell phone, but the other side had hung up before the calls could be traced back to their base station.

"The connection bounces between a lot of places, which makes things very complicated. At any rate, the cell phones are probably stolen, or prepaid, but..."

This report came from a frowning detective from police headquarters named Hiraga. He was the one who had proposed the meeting with Inamine over the high school student serial killer case some time previously. The Library bore him a slight grudge over the storm of criticism that affair had triggered, but he had been quick to ascertain that the Harvest Time Association did not officially exist as a political organization, and he didn't seem to be unwilling to lend his aid in what could have been treated as the Library's problem.

It had been established that the bombs set in the memorial hall, hinted at by the Harvest Time Association, were fake. The main charge against these criminals would be kidnapping.

"I appreciate your assistance," Genda bowed to him, then turned to Doujou and the others. "Hey. Get Shibasaki down here."

Tedzuka nodded, and dashed out of the room.

"Genda-kun," a voice called out to him. It was Orikuchi, whom he had called back again after she had departed. "I'll be here, writing everything down. That's why you called me back here, right?"



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“I’ll leave it up to your judgement. Only, keep Kasahara’s identity out of it—just say she’s a regular staff member. No need to conceal the commander’s identity, though,” Genda said, expression turning grim. “You have access to all information about this incident, on my authority. If you’re going to report, I want you to drive it home—the true ugliness of the Media Improvement Act, when it gets used as an excuse for this kind of violence.”

The Improvement Act incurred the wrath of the entire Library Force when it put Inamine in danger. As a survivor of the Nightmare at Hino twenty years ago, he was the symbol of that tragedy. When someone who supported the Improvement Act laid hands on Inamine, they were brushing up against the Library Force’s own collective nightmare—the one they would never, ever let happen again.

“It was about time for us to make some bold statement about censorship or something like that—otherwise we’d lose face among the other weekly magazines. I’ll enlist their cooperation, and fan the flames of outrage as hard as I can!” Orikuchi’s speech was menacing, but on her face was an unexpectedly ladylike smile.

After listening to the recording of the message Iku had left for her, Shibasaki grinned broadly.

“She used her head all right—well, as much as that dimwit could, anyway.”

“Did you understand her message?” Doujou asked anxiously.

Shibasaki nodded. “Transall is a place we’ve gone a few times; it’s a casual restaurant in Tachikawa. It’s not the kind of fancy place where you need a reservation. Nor did we have any plans to go there today.”

“Alright, officers, it’s Tachikawa! Commander Inamine is in Tachikawa!”

The police personnel suddenly perked up and began to move at Genda’s loud announcement, but Tachikawa was a big place. It would be completely impossible to search it all in the two hours the criminals had allotted them. How long could they drag out the next phone call? The logistical support division had begun copying the microfilm reels, but there was no way they would finish before the exchange took place.

Someone suddenly poked him between the eyebrows. Doujou jumped and flinched back. It was Shibasaki.

“You have unbelievable wrinkles on your forehead. I don’t think you’ll be able to get rid of them completely, even when Kasahara comes back.” Doujou had no reply for that, so he sank into a sullen silence—which made Shibasaki ask something even more difficult to answer. “Do you regret your decision now, sir?”

It was a direct stab to his guilty conscience. —*If I had known things were going to turn out this way...*





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He refused to think about it further. He had unfairly pushed for her assignment to Inamine's bodyguard staff. If this was retribution for that decision, he didn't have the right to be paralyzed into inaction by it.

"Regretting the decision doesn't mean I can go back and change it, now does it?" Doujou replied shortly.

"That's what I like about you," Shibasaki laughed, and as usual, he couldn't tell if she was joking or serious.

★

Her plan to stretch out the call had tragically failed when the phone was snatched away from her, but it was a weight off her shoulders that she had been able to leave a message. Without a doubt, Genda and the others would go and get Shibasaki, and without a doubt, Shibasaki would understand her message.

But after leaving a clue that pointed to Tachikawa, Iku was left with no idea of what to do next.

Suddenly, Inamine leaned over his feet where they rested on his wheelchair and took hold of his trouser cuff.

Before Iku could ask, "*What's wrong, sir?*", one of the criminals shouted menacingly, "What the hell do you think you're doing!?" The man ground the grip of his gun into the back of Inamine's bowed head. Iku barely restrained herself from flinging away her self-control and springing upon him.

Inamine, however, showed neither rage nor fear. He looked up at the man from his bent position. "I would like to remove my leg prosthesis. It seems the socket<sup>19</sup> was jolted out of place by the vibration of the car, and it's causing me quite a bit of pain."

The man snorted, and jerked his chin at Iku. "Make the girl do it for you."

"May I request your assistance?" Inamine asked, and Iku nodded. After all, this kind of aid was the reason Iku had come along—at least, that was what they were pretending.

"I've never removed a leg prosthesis before, so please instruct me," Iku said, taking off Inamine's right shoe and revealing his foot, made of flesh-colored resin. The man who was guarding them exclaimed, "Eugh!" Iku's self-control slipped, and her expression stiffened.

—*dammit, I just wanna kill that asshole!*

Iku continued to roll up his pant leg, uncovering the shaft and the knee joint. Even as she rolled the cloth up to his thigh, it wasn't bunching up too much—perhaps because his leg tapered at that point.

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<sup>19</sup> The part that connects the prosthesis to the body. It usually encases some part of the limb that still exists.





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She had rolled his pant leg up almost the full length of his leg by the time the entire prosthesis was exposed. It was the first time she had seen his leg. It ended in a rounded stump, just a little above the knee. Her instincts caused her to falter, as she came face-to-face with a body missing a crucial piece.

But—“I’m so sorry that you have to see this. It’s something I try to keep even my family from seeing.”

Inamine’s apologetic voice brought her back to her senses like a slap to the face.

This was the leg that had fought during the Nightmare at Hino twenty years ago. It was the leg that had continued marching while enduring untold pain.

Iku looked up at Inamine from her kneeling position and smiled. “I’m ready for your instructions.”

With Inamine patiently gave her step-by-step instructions, Iku removed his prosthesis. Putting it aside carefully, she went to roll his pant leg back down. With nothing to fill it out, the pants leg hung loosely down beyond the knee. The kidnappers glanced at it uncomfortably. It looked like they at last truly understood that Inamine’s leg was missing.

“Is that better? Do you want me to rub it?” She was worried about his leg—he had said it was causing him quite a bit of pain.

Inamine smiled and shook his head. “Now that you’ve removed it, everything is fine.”

★

“Commander Inamine’s *prosthesis has been removed!*” An almost joyful cry arose from a squad leader who had been monitoring a computer terminal.

“What!?” The announcement caused great excitement among Genda and the other staff.

Shibasaki explained to the bewildered detectives, who didn’t understand the implications, “The commander’s prosthesis is constructed so that if it is removed in a certain way, it activates a transmitter.”

Even as the detectives goggled, the Library Force gathered more and more information. “I’ve got the coordinates! It’s an address on the outskirts of Tachikawa!”

“Compare it with the latest residential map!”

“Got it, it’s in a new housing subdivision! The coordinates are within the planned site of a retail complex!”

“The map is six months old, huh? The building must be finished now. All right, sent out a scout from the Library Force branch in Tachikawa. Library Task Force, prepare to move out! We’re gonna get ’em before they contact us again!”

The police were mute with shock. Hiraga finally came to his senses and ran over to



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Genda, who was giving the marching orders. “Wait! Now that we know where they are, the police will take over from here!”

“Why don’t you just let us do this our way?” Genda’s authoritative tone left little room for debate, but Hiraga refused to back down quietly.

“We can’t let you do whatever you want in the middle of our investigation!”

“You can continue your investigation as you please. We’re just going to rescue the commander.”

“We have crack rescue teams too! Leave this to the police!”

“Thanks but no thanks.” Genda didn’t raise his voice, just stated the plain facts. “Our history together has not been so auspicious that we can believe you won’t double-cross us. Am I wrong?”

Hiraga looked as though he had been punched in the face. At last, he cast his eyes down bitterly. “May we not have a chance at redemption?” he whispered softly, as though it didn’t matter if Genda heard him or not. It seemed Hiraga had his own reasons for wanting to help them so badly. Genda had no way of knowing what those reasons were.

“The Library Force will remember the assistance you’ve given us today. Can we shake on that, at least?”

Hiraga didn’t answer, but his lips twisted into a self-mocking smile. Then his expression turned businesslike once again. “But the Library Force’s right to discharge weaponry is limited to within library facilities, unless specific procedures are followed. We cannot shut our eyes to legal violations, even for the sake of justice.”

The application procedure for extending the Library’s legal firing zone to include outside locations was complex and required prior preparations.

“I told you we’d do this our way,” Genda grinned boldly, then fired off orders in rapid succession. “Get in touch with the company that owns the complex! We’re going to acquire it as a future Library Force facility! I don’t care if we have to spend the entire budget surplus of the Kantou branch! Do what you can to keep the audit boys quiet, and the governmental faction too!”

Hiraga’s jaw dropped at the absurd orders. But the Library Force members didn’t hesitate as they started to make the arrangements.

“Pay them whatever the asking price is, just as long as they can get the contract written up in thirty minutes!”

If the Library Force owned the building in name, they would be able to use weapons on the premises. Still, it was particularly absurd Alexandrian solution to this Gordian knot.

“You’re insane!” Hiraga burst out.

Genda gave him a toothy grin. “Using insane methods to vanquish evildoers is the



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Library Force way.”

“But how many hundreds of millions of yen are you planning to pay out for one rescue operation!?”

“The new subdivision is pretty large, so in the near future we would have starting thinking about establishing a new branch library or youth community center there. If you think of this as guaranteeing us a space there, it’s not such an insane idea. We can also sell it if we don’t end up using it, or we could have the company that does our logistical support manage and rent it out for us. That’d be legal if the income went toward the Library Force operating budget. At worst, if the budgetary discussion falls through, all we have to do is pay the contract cancellation fee. Of course, this is something we can do only because we’re the special forces unit of the Library Force,” Genda concluded.

Hiraga looked like he didn’t have the energy to argue any more.

“Doujou!” Genda called. Doujou stood at attention at once. “I’m giving you command of this rescue mission. Gather whatever personnel and equipment you want, then stand by for the order to move out.”

Doujou accepted with a salute, then turned to the Task Force. “Those without other current duties, return to the Task Force office. I’ll announce the composition of the rescue team shortly.”

Doujou himself was the first to depart the lecture hall.

★

*“Let go! Or do you want to go to the police for flagrant shoplifting?”*

To threaten a young woman who was trying to save a single book from the censorship of the Improvement Special Agency—it was just too disgraceful and cowardly.

He could tell that the girl was afraid just by looking at her from behind. Her shoulders had stiffened once in surprise, then hunched inward. He could see her profile as she looked at the people around her; she looked lost and confused, on the verge of tears. It was painfully clear that she was innocent of the charge of shoplifting. No one thought that that was why the girl had hidden the book. But it must be an unbearable humiliation to be thus falsely accused in front of so many people, at such a sensitive age.

However, the moment her eyes met those of the man he supposed was the store manager, the girl’s spine straightened and her hesitation vanished. The man had shaken his head slightly at her, implying, *Don’t defy them.*

“Fine! I’ll go! Manager, call the police and tell them I’m a shoplifter! I’ll go to the station with this book that I stole!”



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Her noble declaration shot right through him. Such integrity and self-sacrifice! The girl was only in high school and had no power compared to the Improvement troops—but even so, she was trying to save the book they were after.

Even though she had nothing but her one small spark of courage.

What the hell was he doing? Why was he just watching, refusing to identify himself, when he was the sole person in the store with the right and ability to fight this censorship?

Finally fed up with her, the Improvement agent shouted and thrust her away. —He couldn't take it anymore.

Civilian bookstores were a demilitarized zone. The right of discretionary selection wasn't something every officer could throw around as they felt like it. He knew the rules. He just didn't give a damn about them anymore.

He caught the girl the moment before she fell. She turned around, surprised. Her expression was determined, but the blood had completely drained from that girlish, still-innocent face, revealing how terrified she was.

He couldn't back down now. He pulled his badge from his jacket and brandished it.

“This is the Kantou Library Force! I hereby choose to exercise my right as a Library Officer Third Class to gather materials freely, as accorded in the Library Laws, Article 30! By the authority granted to me by the Library Law enforcement regulations, I designate these books as my discretionary selection!”

The extravagant gratitude of the shop owner made him immensely uncomfortable. He didn't deserve it; at the beginning he had had no intention of stopping the inspection. And it wasn't as though he had wanted to rescue the store—

He went to return the disputed book to the girl, who had hurt her foot and was resting. She hesitated to take it at first, so he pressed her a little harder. “You were the one who was willing to be branded a shoplifter to protect this book.”

He had wanted to get this girl's book back for her. That was the one and only reason he had acted.

The girl burst into tears, and he gently patted her head to comfort her. She had bravely stood up to the Improvement trooper, but she looked shockingly vulnerable now, as she hung her head and cried. She really was just a little girl.

Her powerlessness made her courage in standing up to censorship all the more dazzling.

It had been five years since that day.

Doujou knew her the moment he laid eyes on her.

“I'm number 153, Kasahara Iku.”



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The tall girl who announced her name and examination number was the woman who had, atypically, designated the Defense Force as her first choice.

She was also the same girl whom Doujou had rescued from censorship, five years earlier.

Sitting at the end of the table, Doujou was shocked and flustered behind his interviewer's mask. But Iku's expression didn't change when their eyes met. Apparently she didn't remember him.

His relief was short-lived. When they asked her about her motive for joining the Defense Force, Iku, in front of all of the interviewers—in front of Genda, Komaki, and the row of other library staff who all remembered the incident—she began to speak passionately of her “fateful meeting” five years before with a Library Force member.

Moreover, her version of events was considerably more heroic. Even Doujou, as the main character, wondered who the hell this perfect superhuman was who starred in her story. “He” was a model Library Force member of fine character, his personality overflowing with noble courage. Toward the end of her recital, Doujou couldn't even raise his head anymore.

*I would pay a million yen to escape this mess. To someone. To anyone.*

The first one to reach the breaking point was the mirthful Komaki. But once the floodgates opened, the others succumbed in quick succession. Eventually the entire table was trying to hold back snickers.

As for Iku, she was staring in puzzlement, not understanding what was so funny. Apparently the way she had talked so passionately of Doujou yet clearly didn't remember him at all tickled his colleagues' funny bones even more.

After the interview, Genda said, “We've got to let her in.” He obviously got a huge kick out of the situation.

Iku's assignment to *Doujou's* training group of all places was probably also at Genda's instigation.

Of course, Iku had no idea, but the story of her rescue at Doujou's hands didn't end with that day.

His unprecedented, arbitrary use of the right of discretionary selection caused an uproar at the library where he had been sent for training. Not only did Doujou write dozens of apology letters, he was called to several hearings. He had expected consequences, but even so, it was a depressing period in his life, and it dragged on for almost half a year. By that time the lesson had sunk into his bones: this is what happens when you break the rules.

At that time within the Kantou Library Force, the friction between the faction that



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supported the Library's principles and the governmental faction was quite intense, and the problems that Doujou had caused unfortunately became excellent ammunition for the governmental faction. He became deeply acquainted with the dark side of the Library Force during that incident.

He didn't regret what he had done. But he would never do it again. By rashly getting carried away by his own feelings during a delicate time, he had put his whole faction in a dangerous position. Doujou still hadn't forgiven himself for that—his rashness in not thinking about the consequences, and his weakness in letting his own feelings get the better of him. Those were the mistakes he tried hardest to avoid making again.

And then Iku appeared, just when he thought he had conquered his flaws. It was like a punch to the gut, to be honest. *Why did you show up now, after such a long time? And why—*

*Why did she treasure all of the things that Doujou had discarded as faults?*

It had been painful, but he had finally discarded them and become somewhat competent and dependable. And suddenly Iku had come along, saying that she liked him better when he was incompetent.

*Don't you dredge up my old self, the one I threw away because it was flawed. Don't you dare admire my defective self—I'm satisfied with who I am now.*

*Don't you try and emulate the self I'm ashamed of, while I have to watch you do it.*

Moreover, Iku had entered the Library Force against her parents' objections and chosen a dangerous combat role—all to pursue the Doujou she had met back then.

It gave him one more reason to rebuke his old self. *She came all this way following your rash, mistake-ridden example. If you hadn't acted that way in front of her, she wouldn't have gone out of her way and chosen such a dangerous profession—or harbored such strange illusions about the Library Force...*

The Library Force wasn't the good and honorable organization she dreamed it was, and its members were far from the champions of justice she wanted to become.

*"When you put it that way, you make it sound like you even want to keep her out of the Defense Force."*

His argument-loving friend's words made him defiant.

Damn straight he wasn't impartial towards her, in any sense of the word. There was no way he could be.

He wished he could make her retire and get out, before she found out the truth about the Library Force, before she found out that she would never be a champion of justice—before he had to watch her get hurt.

Before something happened that couldn't be undone.

Iku, unaware of Doujou's feelings, was vocal and unabashed about her adoration of the



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Doujou she had met five years ago, throwing the present-day Doujou into confusion.

Iku had jumped the gun and decided to invoke her non-existent right of discretionary selection, forcing Doujou go and to clean up after her.

He would collect Iku, and apologize to the Improvement Special Agency for interfering with their inspection. It would be a mortifying duty. That was what he was thinking as he went after her, but—

The moment the Improvement trooper shoved Iku away, he lost it.

It was just like the scene from five years ago. A defiant Iku trying to rescue a book, and—

“It was like you reverted to your old self, Doujou,” Komaki had said wistfully. Those words were nothing but ammunition for his own self-reproach. The only reason there hadn’t been a big uproar was that there was a precedent this time.

But even so—

Rejecting Iku just because she was pursuing his old, mistake-ridden self was a mistake too. It wasn’t as though he had ordered her to pursue him five years ago. Iku had decided on her own to come after him, because she wanted to. Iku was free to make her own choice, and was responsible for the consequences.

Thus even if she got hurt, it was her decision. Doujou wasn’t responsible for her, and trying to take responsibility was just meddling and intrusive.

Fearing her and keeping her away because she caused him confusion was just sidestepping the issue. It was his problem that he was flustered, and it was wrong to treat her like it was her fault.

He knew that now, he had realized it, so—

*Please, God, let her be safe.*

He prayed for his reckless, mistake-ridden subordinate.



The kidnappers were unwilling to expend the time and energy to carry the wheelchair to an upper floor, so they were all concealed on the first floor. It was what saved Iku and Inamine in the end.

Iku was waiting for him, so sure that he would come that when he did, she realized it right away.

Sure enough, the sign came from a window in the likely blind spot of the kidnappers. A hand passed by the corner of the window frame for just a moment, and just from that, she knew. It surprised her—they weren’t friendly enough that she should be able to recognize him by his hand, but she knew instantly that it wasn’t Genda or Komaki or anyone else but





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Doujou.

*After all, that annoying, sadistic instructor always comes for me when I'm in trouble. As much as he mocks and disagrees with my prince, my champion of justice, he comes to my rescue just like a freakin' champion of justice himself.*

To let him know that she had spotted him, she casually let her head drop once in a nod. Doujou should be able to see her from his position.

His hand flashed up again. He made a thumbs-down sign, and jerked his hand twice toward the ground. Next he held up three fingers, and then his hand disappeared again.

*Got it. —I think. Probably.*

“Commander. I’m going to have to be rough with you,” she whispered so that the kidnappers couldn’t hear. Inamine gently put a hand on her shoulder. Iku took that as consent, and nodded casually once again.

Outside the window, Doujou put up his index finger and rocked his hand forward slightly. —*one.*

*Two.*

*Three!*

Iku pulled Inamine from his wheelchair in one instant and dropped to the floor, holding him tightly. Her face stung as she scraped her forehead on the floor, but by the time she registered the pain her comrades had already charged in.

Their kidnappers were amateurs—if they hadn’t threatened to blow up the funeral hall, Inamine’s bodyguards could have overpowered them with nothing but batons. Their reflexes were much, much slower than the speeds the Library Force was trained to beat.

The culprits were captured by the Library Task Force before they could even mount a decent defense.

The kidnappers were handed over to the police investigation team that had accompanied the Task Force.

An ambulance was arranged for Inamine. He wasn’t injured, but at his age the stress of his capture was a concern, so he was going in for an examination, just to be sure.

“They’re certainly making a big fuss over nothing,” Inamine smiled wryly as he boarded the ambulance. Iku, of course, didn’t need one. There was no way she would be fatigued after a just a few hours of imprisonment; all that training hadn’t been for nothing, after all. Her days of basic training when she first enlisted had been much more exhausting.

Komaki admired her fortitude in a characteristic tone; when Iku tried to downplay her heroism, Tedzuka murmured in surprise, “You’ve got a lot of nerve.” She couldn’t tell if it was supposed to be praise or censure.



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And then, there was Doujou.

He didn't even glance her way until the situation was under control, then after things had calmed down, he belatedly asked, "Are you alright?"

"More or less, I guess," Iku answered with her usual wariness.

And then it came, like a surprise attack. "You did well. I take back what I said about you having no fighting potential."

*Dammit—I hate this.* Iku looked down at the ground, unable to decide on a facial expression.

She hated that his approval made her so happy. She hated that she had wanted his approval so badly.

"...thank you, sir," she muttered sulkily.

Doujou looked away, the same sulkiness suffusing his own features. "I admit that my decision about your assignment was unfair. Forgive me."

"It's not an issue that requires my forgiveness, Instructor Doujou. You had a judgement to make, and you made it."

"Don't contradict someone who's trying to apologize to you!"

"Well, perhaps *you* should try to recognize when someone's trying to meet you halfway!"

"Give it a rest," Komaki intervened from the sidelines. "You two really are exactly alike. You're both stubborn, you're both rebellious..."

"I can see it now too, a little," Tedzuka was nodding. "Perhaps Bear-Killers of a feather flock together?" Iku and Doujou's expressions simultaneously turned rueful as Tedzuka dredged up the old forgotten joke.

"Let's go home," Komaki said, heading toward the vehicles. Tedzuka followed him.

"—You've got quite an ugly scrape on your face," Doujou stated bluntly as they set out, causing Iku to belatedly remember the scratch on her forehead, which was throbbing with a dull ache. She hadn't looked at it in a mirror yet, but apparently it was rather conspicuous.

She was thinking about letting her bangs down to hide it, when Doujou spoke again. "Your parents are visiting soon, aren't they? If you let yourself get too many fresh injuries, they're going to figure out that you're in a combat role."

So he had been concerned about her, after a fashion.

"...if I..." *If I quit, would it inconvenience you?* She was frustrated with herself for trying to ask that question. *Why do I want him of all people to indulge me and tell me I'm needed?*

And then, Doujou had the nasty habit of reading her mind right when she most wished he wouldn't.

"It wouldn't overly inconvenience us if you quit. The same goes for anyone. Even if you



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think someone is irreplaceable, if they leave, someone fills the hole,” Doujou declared.

After a minute, he added, “But it would be a shame.”

*Dammit.* She was happy to hear it.

“I’m not gonna quit. Not even if my parents find out, not even if they make a huge fuss about it! Absolutely not. I love this job.” From behind Doujou, who in spite of being shorter than she was was her biggest obstacle, she announced, “I’m going to surpass you. That’s why I’m not gonna quit.”

“You plan on working past retirement age?” Without turning, Doujou delivered the most provoking retort possible.

★

Because the Harvest Time Association’s attack was perfectly timed to coincide with the battle for the Museum of Information History, it was thought that they must have been acting on the information and instigation of the Media Improvement Committee, but the Committee said that they had given the same answers to every supportive organization’s questions about their censorship plans, and denied any specific involvement.

“The supporting organizations will probably corroborate their story, even if the Committee didn’t arrange it with them ahead of time. It’s a shade of black just on this side of gray.” Shibasaki was probably right. Suspicions against the Improvement Committee had been that shade of gray for thirty years. “Oh well. Anyway, well done yesterday.”

When Iku had returned, Shibasaki’s only reaction had been a disappointingly casual “Welcome back,” but she had come home from work today swinging a bag from the local cake shop, so apparently she had some appreciation for Iku’s efforts, in her own way.

“So then, what have you been moaning about all this time?” As she brewed the instant coffee, Shibasaki peeked over at the picture postcard under Iku’s hand.

“Mmmm, I’m trying to write a postcard to my parents, but...”

Iku hadn’t yet answered her parents’ postcard from the other day, and it was now a little less than a month before her they would come to Tokyo. Knowing that it would be a chore, she had dragged her feet and put off her reply, but of course, if she didn’t answer before they came, it would only make things worse.

*It may be awkward and difficult to deal with them, but it’s not like I can ever escape them in my lifetime, so I might as well suck it up,* she tried to tell herself, but when she actually sat down to write, her pen just wouldn’t move. It was currently hovering at a standstill over the closing lines of the postcard.

“Hey, the coffee’s ready. Why don’t you put down your pen before it gets cold?” Shibasaki suggested, as she remove the cakes from their box. Since it was a pain to wash



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dishes, she did what they usually did and put each cake on a tissue. “They had special seasonal cakes—pumpkin Mont Blanc and Kyoho grape cheesecake—so I decided to give them a try. Which one do you want?”

“Ummm, wait a minute, wait a minute, I’m almost done.”

“I’m going to make your decision for you if you don’t hurry up.”

“Whaaat?” Iku wrote the last few strokes of her letter, signed it, and quickly tossed the postcard and pen aside.

“Wow, that was a rush job. You know, you could have finished it properly later.”

“I couldn’t savor my cake with something like that hanging over my head.”

“You chose cake over your own parents?” Shibasaki teased, but then added, laughing, “Well, it is autumn. Time to eat hearty.”

“You said it. Man, they both look so good! I can’t decide...”

“Come on, we can each have a bite of the other’s, you know.”

After long deliberation, Iku chose the pumpkin Mont Blanc.

★

*Dear Mother and Father,*

*How are you? I’m doing fine. Work is crazy every day, but I think I’m getting used to it.*

*I’ve made friends with my roommate, and we’ve been getting along. I’m not friends with my coworker really, but he’s not a bad guy. My superiors range from hearty and exuberant to gentle and serene, with every variation in between, so there’s never a dull moment.*

*My immediate superior has a pretty scary temper, and also kind of a nasty personality, but there are also a few things I can admire about him. He’s really hard to understand, but sometimes he’s pretty nice. I wish he were a little nicer and easier to understand, though.*

*I find my job at the library very worthwhile. I want to keep working hard at it, no matter what happens.*

*You’re coming to Tokyo soon for the memorial service, right? Please say hello to my uncle and everyone for me. I’m also very much looking forward to your visit to my library.*

*Iku*

*fin.*

## Afterword

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“The concept this time is...like a Monday night serial drama<sup>1</sup>, all at once!”

At least, that was what the first bare-bones outline of the plot was like, when I presented it to my editor. Since it was a serial drama, of course there would be a romance plot. “So, *this* is your version of a Monday night drama, Arikawa-san?” “Ummm, well then, how about something like the ‘Administrative Squadron Library Rangers<sup>2</sup>?’” “Your concept is flying to pieces as we speak...” “Good! Let’s go with it!”

We also said, “I don’t want the world to become like this one.” You really wouldn’t, would you.

The seed of the idea for *Toshokan Sensou* was planted by a plaque hanging in my neighborhood library, which presented the Declaration of Library Freedom. The first time I saw it, I thought it was quite stirring and brave. For some reason I couldn’t stop thinking about it and started doing a bunch of research, and before I knew it, the idea for the plot had developed. Many thanks to my husband for pointing out the plaque to me!

If by any chance, you read this book and are interested in the current situation of libraries in Japan, I hope you’ll please research them on your own. With the kind of book this is, the depiction of our libraries is quite inconsistent with their reality.

This new book is my first “normal” story. There was no salt, no ellipses, no crayfish<sup>3</sup>, so it must be normal! The basis for this one is rock-solid! Bring it on! Just kidding, please don’t bring it, sorry.

If you laughed and said “What the hell is this?” as you read, I consider that an added bonus. If you liked the story, I think I’d like to continue this Monday night drama, so thank you in advance for your support.

Well, a lot of people helped me out again as I wrote this book.

First of all, my editor Tokuda-san, and everyone I’m indebted to for getting the book published, thank you again. Especially Tokuda-san, who nurtured my chickenish spirit in so many ways, thank you so much...

To everyone else in the business who encouraged me. I can’t tell you how much our discussions have saved me from some bad situations, in the past and during this book too. Thank you very much.

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1 The most popular TV dramas in Japan traditionally air at 9 PM on Mondays.

2 A parody of the *Super Sentai* series of superhero adventure shows (adapted in America as *Power Rangers*). The name of each incarnation of the series follows a highly recognizable pattern, and it is that pattern that Arikawa parodies here. Examples include *High-Speed Squadron TurboRanger* and *Future Squadron Timeranger*.

3 References to Arikawa’s three previous novels, *The City of Salt*, *The Heart of the Sky*, and *The Depths of the Sea*, respectively.

Thank you to Shigusawa Keiichi-sama, who let me include an homage to his work<sup>4</sup>, and Kamikawa Minoru-sama, who gave me an idea for the advertising blurb<sup>5</sup>.

And then, my contemporary Adabana Sukumo-san, who took over the illustration and insignia design. There was talk of working together when we first debuted, but those plans have only now been realized. Thank you for taking on the artistic side of things. If the series continues, I hope I can count on you again!

To all my friends, who always support me, especially my husband: thank you so much for everything. Having you by my side is a great source of strength for me.

And finally, to you who are now holding my book in your hands<sup>6</sup>, I offer up gratitude from the bottom of my heart.

Arikawa Hiro

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4 Shigusawa Keiichi is the author of the *Kino's Journey* series of light novels. The book *Kana of the Wastes*, referred to in Chapter 4, was an homage to this series.

5 Kamikawa Minoru is another light novel author. According to a resource I found online, he suggested to Arikawa that the advertising blurb for *Toshokan Sensou* should say “paying a surprise visit to the library” rather than “meeting with the library.”

6 ...figuratively speaking...

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## The Library Force

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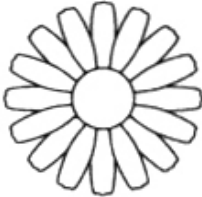










### Library Force Job Categories

<b>Job category</b>	Librarian	Defense Force member	Logistical Support member
<b>Stationed under</b>	Library Administration Division	Defense Force Division	Logistical Support Division
<b>Main duties</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• general library duties</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• library defense duties</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• book purchasing</li><li>• combat equipment supply and maintenance</li><li>• general logistics</li></ul>

- ※ The Library Force General Affairs Department is staffed by promotion from the Library Administration Division and Defense Force Division, as well as those sent from the government.
- ※ The Personnel Departments of the General Affairs Department are housed in each Library Base, and they supervise all personnel affairs within their jurisdictions.
- ※ Logistical support is outsourced to a large company, so Library Force members are never assigned to the Logistical Support Division except as management.

## The Library Force (continued)

### Library Force Ranks<sup>1</sup>

Library Supervisor Special Class	Library Supervisor First Class	Library Supervisor Second Class	Library Supervisor Third Class
			
	Library Officer First Class	Library Officer Second Class	Library Officer Third Class
			
Chief Librarian	Librarian First Class	Librarian Second Class	Librarian Third Class
			

※ There are also temporary Librarians, Library Officers, and Library Supervisors, but these ranks are restricted to the outsourced staff of the Logistical Support Division. The authority of temporary Force members is limited to within the Logistical Support Division.

<sup>1</sup> The rank insignia are inspired by the actual insignia of the Japanese Army; see [http://uniforminsignia.org/?option=com\\_insigniasearch&Itemid=53&result=875](http://uniforminsignia.org/?option=com_insigniasearch&Itemid=53&result=875)

## Profiles

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### **Arikawa Hiro**

Raised in Kouchi Prefecture, she moved to the Kansai region to attend college. Currently, she has lived in Kansai for more than ten years as a slightly (all right, more than slightly) lazy housewife. Even now, she hasn't managed to lose her accent, and she has command of a dubious, imposter version of the Kansai dialect. When speaking of her birthplace, she displays a bit of passionate case of hometown pride. Her debut novel was *The City of Salt*, published by ASCII Media Works and winner of the Tenth Annual Dengeki Novel Prize Grand Prize. Her other works include *The Heart of the Sky* and *The Depths of the Sea*. Her work is also irregularly serialized in the literary magazine *Untamed Age*.

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### **Adabana Sukumo**

Winner of the Tenth Annual Dengeki Game Illustration Prize Gold Prize. For this job, he took the opportunity to change his pen name from "Shiina Sukumo" to "Adabana Sukumo." His hobbies include keeping fish and reading. He is Arikawa's most zealous fan.

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### **Melithiel**

A software engineer from America in her early twenties, she studied Japanese for two years in college and translates to keep her skills sharp. She loves libraries but doesn't use them often because she is terrible about remembering to return books.